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## ABSTRACT

This monograph deals with the dominant characteristics of liberal education as a number of historical typologies, models, or categories, and attempts, from time to time, to distinguish the claims made by defenders from reality. The typologies, chosen because of their frequent occurrence in discussions of liberal education, are: character formation, leadership, breadth, personality development, critical thinking, and general education. The discussion begins with an exploration of secondary education as a determinant of how liberal education is conceived and taught at higher levels. The monograph identifies strands of liberal education that have vanished, and it makes the case that the historical change from a university mission centered on the dissemination of knowledge to its transformation has created difficulties for inherited conceptions of liberal education. In fact, formal education may not be the only means of achieving some of the traditional ends of liberal education. Liberal education may need to be moved toward realizable objectives. Three large topics need to be considered: (1) the role of secondary education in furthering the ends of liberal education; (2) a review of the principal objectives of liberal education as historically defined; and (3) the reconsideration of what should be taught as liberal education and how it should be taught. Appendixes discuss new technologies and list participants in an international discussion of liberal education. (Contains 23 endnotes and 36 references.) (SLD)

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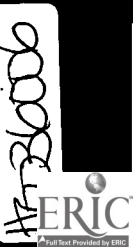
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## Comparative and Historical Reflections on Liberal Education

*by Sheldon Rothblatt*



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Comparative and Historical  
Reflections on Liberal Education

*by Sheldon Rothblatt*

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## About this Series

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has a long history of working with college leaders across the country to articulate the aims of a liberal education in our time. AAC&U is distinctive as a higher education association. Its mission focuses centrally on the quality of student learning and the changing purpose and nature of undergraduate curricula.

AAC&U has taken the lead in encouraging and facilitating dialogue on issues of importance to the higher education community for many years. Through a series of publications called *The Academy in Transition*—launched in 1998 with the much-acclaimed *Contemporary Understandings of Liberal Education*—AAC&U has helped fuel dialogue on such issues as the globalization of the undergraduate curricula, the growth of interdisciplinary studies, and the increase of college-level learning in high school. The purposes of the series—now including seven titles—are to analyze changes taking place in key areas of undergraduate education and to provide “road maps” about the directions and destinations of the changing academy.

During transitions, it is important to understand context and history and to retain central values, even as forms and structures that have supported those values may have to be adapted to new circumstances. For instance, AAC&U is convinced that a practical and engaged liberal education is a sound vision for the new academy, even if the meanings and practices of liberal education are in the process of being altered by changing conditions. As the titles in this series suggest, AAC&U’s vision encompasses a high quality liberal education for all students that emphasizes connections between academic disciplines and practical and theoretical knowledge, prizes general education as central to an educated person, and includes global and cross-cultural knowledge and perspectives. Collectively, these essays point to a more purposeful, robust, and efficient academy that is now in the process of being created. They also encourage thoughtful, historically informed dialogue about the future of the academy.

AAC&U encourages faculty members, academic leaders, and all those who care about the future of our colleges and universities to use these papers as a point of departure for their own analyses of the directions of educational change. We hope these essays will encourage academics to think broadly and creatively about the educational communities we inherit, and, by our contributions, the educational communities we want to create.

Debra Humphreys

Vice President for Communications and Public Affairs

Association of American Colleges and Universities



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# *A Note from the Publisher*

Sheldon Rothblatt's illuminating study, *The Living Arts: Comparative and Historical Reflections on Liberal Education*, appears at a propitious moment. Liberal education has entered a period of significant reconfiguration. The outcome remains uncertain, and Rothblatt himself admits that he "weaves between pessimism and optimism." But the questions he explores are integral to the quality, vitality, and humanity of the twenty-first century academy.

*The Living Arts* essay, richly informed by a lifetime of transnational scholarship, will help readers locate today's debates over the aims, practices, and future of liberal education in the larger sweep of historical, educational, and international developments. Historically, Rothblatt shows us the diverse and sometimes conflicting purposes of liberal education as they have evolved, intersected, and transformed over the centuries. In doing so, he helps readers discover liberal education as a responsively adaptive tradition, protean in ways that account both for its resilience over time and for its complexity today.

Educationally, Rothblatt helps us understand why the richness of liberal education remains so compelling, even as its outcomes prove difficult to measure with today's often reductive assessment tools. Comparatively, this essay shows us that liberal education is gaining new attention in international circles, even as American headlines trumpet news of "The Liberal Arts in Crisis." How and why both developments emerge simultaneously is a fascinating subtext of this essay.

## SHOULD STUDENTS BE NARROWLY TRAINED OR LIBERALLY EDUCATED?

When the aims of higher learning are framed in these terms, the second alternative is surely the most attractive. Who would consign students to a narrow passageway, when a more capacious design for learning can develop their talents and enlarge both their horizons and their opportunities? Though liberal education has assumed many forms over time and in the modern academy, it has always been concerned with these broader educational aims: cultivating intellectual and ethical judgment, helping students comprehend and negotiate their relationship to the larger world, and preparing graduates for lives of civic responsibility and employment. And yet, American society today exhibits a striking schizophrenia towards the traditions of "liberal" or "liberal arts" education. Liberal education is at one and the same time prized, disguised, and resisted.

On the one hand, liberal education is recognizably the philosophy of choice at the nation's most famous institutions, the campuses where admission is seen as virtually synonymous with the expansion of opportunity. There is, moreover, a persistent identification of liberal education with democratic freedom, excellence, and scientific progress that goes back to the revolutionary



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period when many civic and political leaders both extolled the liberal arts and also expanded them to embrace the scientific and practical needs of the republic. Most accredited colleges and universities still espouse this liberal education ideal and typically require that their students take some fraction of their studies in fields and programs aligned with the broader aims of education. Moreover, liberal education at the start of the twenty-first century is anything but a static tradition. Our nation's campuses are dotted with innovative programs that indisputably are re-inventions of liberal education for a new era and a newly diverse population of students.

On the other hand, even as specific practices within liberal education are being reinvigorated, the tradition itself is concealed. Consider the signature curricula and pedagogies that have begun to flower over the last twenty years: first-year seminars, writing-across-the-disciplines, undergraduate research, topically linked "learning communities," programs in intercultural and global learning, service-learning, interdisciplinary capstone courses and projects. Each of these is a recognizable and broadly influential effort to help students become liberally educated and, toward that goal, to make their learning more engaged, better connected with the community, more "hands-on," and more educationally powerful. And yet, while they are heavily promoted by the academy, these innovative programs are rarely described in campus promotional materials as "liberal" or "liberal arts" education. Thus students who participate in them may never be told that they are engaged in liberal education.

Correspondingly, there is little public understanding or even awareness of liberal education, despite its continuing influence on both established and innovative curricula. Studies routinely show that the public does not value it. Campus leaders report that students also don't know what liberal or liberal arts education is and that even many faculty are uncertain. As engagement with the tradition recedes, the practices associated with liberal education have themselves become fragmented. The innovations in liberal education are frequently either spliced jaggedly onto an earlier curricular architecture, or remain elective rather than integral.

Simultaneously, political leaders routinely endorse workforce development as both a priority and the primary rationale for the expansion of postsecondary education. And most students focus on studies that will transparently lead to employment.

Given this context, the nation is in danger of squandering an extraordinary and unprecedented opportunity. With millions of students of all ages and backgrounds both aspiring to higher learning and actually enrolling, a new majority of Americans could, in principle, now

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achieve the kind of capacious liberal education once reserved only for a tiny elite. Instead, many policy leaders, and the majority of Americans, now endorse—whether explicitly or tacitly—narrow occupational training.

*The Living Arts* offers as a solution to this narrowing of the American mind neither a public information campaign nor a pushback against the rising tide of vocationalism. Rather, Rothblatt proposes a new willingness to remove intellectual and structural impediments to liberal education that the academy itself invented and institutionalized. Rothblatt argues that it is time to revisit and reconfigure the historical divides between the “liberal” and the “servile” arts, and thereby, reshape the relations between “liberal arts” and “professional” fields of study. The orthodox liberal arts dividing line, at least in the twentieth century, has been between fields pursued as basic science, or “for their own sake,” and fields that are “merely” applied. But “the argument can be made,” Rothblatt observes, “that the university has always been, first and foremost, an institution for applied learning.” Moreover, the professions today share many common concerns with the liberal arts tradition, such as the molding of character, the commitment to a larger public vision, and issues of values and ethical conduct. The question is whether conventional and institutional barriers between liberal arts versus applied fields can be removed and new connections cultivated.

Rothblatt’s conclusions have much in common with the primary recommendations of *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, AAC&U’s new report on the aims of education. *Greater Expectations* insists that every student deserves a liberal education—but liberal education redefined to embrace and address the way knowledge is actually used in the world, including the world of work and civil society. The report calls for a new synthesis between liberal and practical education, throughout the educational experience.

Clearly, both Sheldon Rothblatt and the Greater Expectations National Panel are calling on the academy to embrace a profound and far-reaching reinvention of liberal education. And yet, as we have already seen, changes are already afoot that have the potential to lead to a new and more enriching educational practice, for every field of study and for every student.

In presenting this essay to the higher education community, I am happy to thank not only Sheldon Rothblatt but also Robert Orrill, Executive Director of the National Council on Education and the Disciplines (NCED), for their intellectual leadership on behalf of liberal education. As the companion foreword to this volume explains, *The Living Arts* emerges from an international NCED “Conversation” on liberal education. The “Conversation” was conceived

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by Robert Orrill, who recognized its timeliness and wisely chose the perfect interlocutor to place our explorations in the fullest possible context. We warmly thank both Sheldon Rothblatt and Robert Orrill for the good collegueship with AAC&U that stands behind this shared publication. It is also a pleasure to thank Carnegie Corporation of New York for its multiple contributions to both NCED and AAC&U. Carnegie Corporation supported both the "Conversation" and this publication and continues to provide significant assistance to AAC&U's ongoing Greater Expectations initiative. Both the NCED Conversation and the Greater Expectations initiative have further benefited from the wisdom and scholarship of our shared program officer, Daniel Fallon of Carnegie Corporation.

Carol Geary Schneider

President

Association of American Colleges and Universities

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## Foreword

Scholars disagree about the exact origin of the idea of liberal education, but they all point to its deep roots in Western culture. We should not be in the least surprised, therefore, that the practice of liberal education has taken many different turns and assumed a variety of shapes over the course of its long history. Indeed, this very longevity suggests that liberal education is wonderfully adaptive, and, viewed in this way, it often can be seen rising to prominence in one setting even as its status weakens in another. Just now, for example, some of the most interesting experiments in liberal education are underway in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe where, as can be easily imagined, an education designed to be liberating has both great individual significance and pressing social relevance. So, given this fertile capacity to produce evolutionary variants, it stands to reason that the overall orientation and health of liberal education can never be determined entirely by reference to its practice in a single national environment or during only one period of time.

How, though, can we escape the problems and pressures of the moment and arrive at this more comprehensive point of view? It was the pursuit of this question that led the National Council on Education and the Disciplines (NCED) to set out three years ago to convene “An International Conversation on the Past, Present, and Future of Liberal Education.” True to its title, this still ongoing series of discussions has sought to help educators take stock of liberal education through a two-fold approach: one that is at once comparative in adopting an international perspective and historical in tracing varying national traditions and evolutionary trends. To create this unique outlook on liberal education, NCED brought together a multinational group of distinguished educators that included participants from the United States, Israel, and ten European countries. This group has now met twice, each time for two days of conversational exchange and deliberation aimed at gaining a better understanding of the condition of liberal education both within and across national boundaries. Names and affiliations of the discussants are listed at the close of this publication, and, for all who are interested, an informal record of the first two convenings can be found on the NCED Web site ([www.woodrow.org/nced](http://www.woodrow.org/nced)).

Even though the “Conversation” is still in its early stages, Sheldon Rothblatt has given us in *The Living Arts* one of its first offspring. In part, this essay stems from the special role that Professor Rothblatt was invited to play in the discussions—namely as one who, from time to time, would take responsibility for stepping back from the table to offer reflective comment about what had been said or to make suggestions concerning where the conversation might

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go next. This was an assignment that he performed deftly and delightfully, but *The Living Arts* is in no sense his attempt to reproduce the discussions or to summarize the views of “Conversation” participants. Instead, it is very much a personal sorting out of his own thoughts—comparative, historical, and sometimes futuristic—about the idea and practice of liberal education as they have arisen in pondering questions and issues emerging from this many-sided international conversation. In short, *The Living Arts* is a richly-rewarding contemplative act, not an informational report or descriptive account of the “Conversation” itself.

*The Living Arts* perhaps is best considered as itself part of the literature of liberal education. With remarkable economy, Professor Rothblatt has given us not only an up-to-date account but also a lifetime of reflection about the past, present, and possible future of liberal education. These thoughts are organized around a discussion of the “models” or “typologies” of liberal education that have achieved dominance over the centuries, but this, I hasten to add, has been no abstract undertaking for Professor Rothblatt. Throughout he has inquired into the contemporary viability of each of these models—or how, as he says, they now appear to fit within “the systems and structures in which liberal education is embedded, even engulfed.” In this inquiry, moreover, he has not sought to establish an essence for the “living arts” but rather to make clear how “they are the means by which men and women have sought to interpret the world or to take a comprehensive view of it.” This reader concludes that, considered as such, the living arts are certain to have an important future in education as well as a long and varied history.

Professor Rothblatt has thanked the participants in the “Conversation” for their many contributions to *The Living Arts*. Let me thank them again, for the signs of their intellectual generosity and deep concern for liberal education are writ large throughout this essay. Thanks also must go to Carol Geary Schneider, president of AAC&U, who first urged that *The Living Arts* should be made available to all and opened the way to its publication. Finally, there could have been no “Conversation”—and thus no occasion for Professor Rothblatt to write *The Living Arts*—without the moral and financial support of Carnegie Corporation of New York. The sustained and indispensable philanthropic help provided by Carnegie beginning from early in the twentieth century is one of the untold stories in the history of American liberal education.

Robert Orrill

Executive Director

National Council on Education and the Disciplines

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# *I. Introduction: An American Obsession*

**M**artha Nussbaum traces the phrase “liberal education” back to the stoic philosopher Seneca. From him derives support for the injunction ascribed to Socrates that the mark of a complete human being is the “examined life” (Nussbaum 2002). As the following reflections indicate, the examined life is one of many interpretations of the meaning of a liberal education, albeit a most attractive commitment, relating closely to its outcome, that of being humanly complete. Nevertheless, the attractions of any commitment also depend upon the historical circumstances that always affect the employment of ideas and beliefs, strengthening but also twisting them into odd and uncomfortable shapes. And some beautiful thoughts are only alive as thoughts. Their reality is gone, and we hear only the ghost of lost traditions whimpering upon the grave thereof.

Despite its antiquity, liberal education is often assumed to be unique to the American Republic—perhaps with roots in other traditions, but absorbed and transformed in light of American cultural development. Considerable truth abides in this assumption. Liberal education is tightly correlated with American democracy, with American ideas of citizenship and opportunity, and with American versions of Aristotle’s view of a life well lived. When they become democratic, other nations also look to liberal education to provide the right formula for preserving some kind of balance, however precarious, between traditions that appear to offer reassurance and innovations that are necessary but threatening.

Liberal education is something of an educational industry in the United States as nowhere else. It is part of what Gerald Grant and David Riesman (1978) have called “the perpetual dream,” a national emotional investment in the small college idea with which liberal education is particularly associated. That idea lives on quite successfully in corners of American higher education. The two St. John’s colleges famously adhere to their notable reforms of 1937.<sup>1</sup> The curriculum is strictly defined, and the purposes clearly laid out. The mode of instruction takes place in tutorials, preceptorials, seminars, and laboratories. Providing for the last, however, is an educational challenge to a curriculum soundly based on great texts, “books of superlative worth by the best thinkers and about central questions [rather] than second- or third-rate books by lesser thinkers” (Smith 1983). The vast majority of undergraduates, most of them in attendance at large state institutions, will never experience the attractions associated with the collegiate idea, nor will they be exposed to the hoary belief that some authors are absolutely indispensable to the very notion of a cultivated person.

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Few higher education institutions today are very confident about a great books tradition. Historical and cultural changes referred to in the course of the following narrative have rendered faith in a canon of superior thought less popular; but the belief that a college structure is best suited to providing liberal education still animates educational reformers. Some readers may remember the spell cast by Black Mountain College located in the foothills of North Carolina, established for a short time by a renegade from Rollins College in Florida. Joseph Tussman, thoroughly dismayed by what passed for liberal education at the University of California-Berkeley in the 1960s, created a two-year (also short-lived) program for the intensive study of political systems still referred to by his name (Tussman 1997). At the same time, Clark Kerr, then president of the entire University of California, dreamt of a collegiate style university in the mountains of Santa Cruz, a "Swarthmore in the redwoods" as he called it in happy recollection of his own beloved college. The object was to provide a state research university with the advantages of small college environments, somewhat akin, perhaps, to Cambridge University. He never imagined that Santa Cruz would be caught up in the counter-culture movements of the 1960s and plunge on to destinations far removed from the Quaker principles of his Pennsylvania inspiration. Santa Cruz today, to Kerr's disappointment, conforms more closely to the research university pattern of its sister campuses, but the natural beauty of its collegiate setting is undeniable.

Collegiate beauty is in fact a cornerstone of American liberal education, and it is one aspect of the history of liberal education that has been successfully transferred to the large university. Campus planning is an American innovation, incorporating ideas from the history of landscaping and collegiate architecture typical of Oxford and Cambridge. The grounds and buildings of countless American institutions express an attachment to romantic environments that promote surprise, self-reflection, and personal discovery, elements often included in one set of liberal education beliefs (Rothblatt 1997).

Newer campuses in Europe located on the edges of cities, but several within them, reveal how well American practice has traveled abroad. American commitments to liberal education are also strongly represented in the mission of national organizations, such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Academy for Liberal Education. They exist to disseminate and support ideas and practices that fall within their understanding of liberal education. Numerous books, articles, magazines, conferences, and philanthropic projects are devoted to the explication and definition of liberal education.

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While Europe and America share many cultural and political traits, the contrasts between European and American types of higher education remain significant. Yet, while there are fine histories of liberal education that trace aspects of its evolution from ancient times to the present, actual comparisons between countries and opportunities for one country to learn from the experience of another are in short supply. They almost never figure in the numerous discussions and conferences that take place in the United States, except in passing. Much of what is ordinarily discussed in the literature on liberal education or in panels is parochial and culture-bound. Overlooked as well are the systems and structures in which liberal education is embedded, or even engulfed. How liberal education is actually delivered, how it is incorporated into distinct organizations, is as much a part of its narrative as its ideas and purposes. If, as everyone acknowledges, liberal education encourages generous reflection, then assuredly a comparative, international, and historical perspective offers additional ways of seeing old problems.

The times are especially propitious for comparative educational analysis. Nations are looking to one another for general enlightenment. Sharp national differences notwithstanding, common problems are emerging as developed societies embrace the democratic objective of higher education for all. This “all” now includes immigrants and new citizens, different ethnic and religious groups from countries outside the customary western European penumbra, and the families of manual workers—the most underrepresented in higher education of all social groups in any country. As in America, the profile of an undergraduate is changing. Many students are older or non-traditional, employed part-time, supporting families, or from social backgrounds where higher education is not common. Continuing education has become a major and lucrative enterprise, as education fitted for specific phases of the life cycle loses its importance. Where life itself is nasty, brutish, and short, the stages of the life cycle have a special intensity and significance. They are truly rites of passage, and the advent of maturity is a critical moment. Where, however, the stages are drawn out and collapse into one another, adulthood cannot be regarded as a fundamental transformation. It is instead a continuous process of growth and adjustment (Kegan 1994). In a volatile world of shifting economic priorities and qualifications, keeping abreast of new knowledge is important. Lifelong learning programs have also found eager audiences as the years of learning extend far into a lifetime.

*“Sharp national differences  
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Historically, liberal education was reserved for the privileged young and, if we go back far enough, the very young. Now, in profoundly transformed historical circumstances, the coming of age that liberal education was intended to assist is not itself as seminal a task. Students are more active socially before entering higher education. Undergraduates travel; they are international; and they are not as callow as they were a century ago. In Europe, they cross national borders as a matter of course, a liberal education of sorts that acquaints them, if casually, with neighboring languages and cultures. Few professors today regard the maturing of the student as one of their primary responsibilities, and few undergraduates are ready to tolerate the professor who assumes the place of a parent. Colleges and universities actually welcome and encourage this attitude, for it alleviates an otherwise bothersome moral, emotional, and financial burden.

At present no dimension of modern life is untouched by universities, no social or economic arena is discounted, and no aspect of social or personal development is unaffected. Professors, lecturers, and other academics now comprise the “key profession” because they educate all the others says the historian Harold Perkin (1969). Government and academic leaders, as well as leaders of cultural and professional organizations, assure us that the social conditions of the present are leading colleges and universities toward revolutionary outcomes. Society demands massive involvement, and higher education itself wants this to be so. Whether or not they were ever ivory towers, colleges and universities certainly had fewer constituencies and dependencies in the past. Academic life was simpler, and a clear orientation was easier.

*“While liberal education has never exactly vanished from the European educational agenda, it has been decidedly low on the scale of priorities.”*

Historians, sensitive to the accidents and contingencies that affect human affairs, are normally wary of predicting futures. A trend is not necessarily an outcome. Yet probably it is reasonable to suppose that transformations currently under way will and in fact are bringing us more and different learning alternatives. Predictably, the costs of educating huge numbers have risen despite all efforts to achieve what are euphemistically called “efficiency gains.” In the public sector of most countries, where higher education competes with other and growing social needs, the expenses of education have reached a crisis stage. Mass higher education has increased student indebtedness, and colleges and universities are being asked to place more emphasis on vocational instruction and employable skills (rather than, say, “culture”). Team-working, problem solving, communications abilities, and numeracy are often

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listed among the skills in demand. At the moment, such demands appear to be irresistible. In Europe and America, many colleges and universities have altered their educational, degree, and diploma programs; but whereas in America such ongoing readjustments have been common, in Europe they have been less so until a decade or two ago. So strong are the pressures that some scholars are tempted to say that in today's educational ecology liberal education is "practical" or is being influenced by "pragmatism" (Orrill 1995). Since all education is always useful in some sense, presumably we are hearing about a new kind of liberal arts practicality.

### LIBERAL EDUCATION AND TODAY'S EUROPE

In the cauldron of education reform that is today's Europe, liberal education has reappeared as a subject of interest in discussions about breadth and depth in the curriculum. Nowhere has discussion reached the levels prevalent in the United States, however, and there is no obsession corresponding to the ongoing American debates. Europe has few organizations or programs specifically devoted to promoting liberal education as the descendent of different and competing traditions. Within Europe, Scotland may be an exception in that its traditions of liberal education are still invoked as a special part of what it means to be Scottish. Moreover, Scottish and American educational ideas are closely linked historically, especially in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

If it is true that references and allusions to various forms of liberal education abound in Europe, the offshore observer has difficulty discerning the depth of concern. In Sweden there is much talk today of *bildning*, and in Norway of *dannelse*, Nordic variants of the German idea of a liberal education called *Bildung*. These highly philosophical and metaphysical conceptions dating from the nineteenth century resist exact definition. While liberal education has never exactly vanished from the European educational agenda, it has been decidedly low on the scale of priorities. With only a few exceptions, governments, ministries, politicians, and bureaucrats establish the parameters of educational discussion in Europe. Until about 1990, the agenda largely followed from the fact that higher education was almost wholly dependent upon public taxation. The efficient use of resources in achieving national ends was the prime concern. The corresponding subjects for analysis were, therefore, budgets, planning, student access and targets, campus management and governance, assessment and quality maintenance, applied versus basic research, institutional differentiation, government-university relations, and, more recently, privatization or globalization. Governments remain preoccupied with questions of resource allocation

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and higher education on the cheap, even as they also consider policies that promote wealth generation, occupational mobility, and international competition. These policy concerns are equally under scrutiny in the United States, but, while it has some influence, Washington does not set the national agenda. Moreover, the existence of a large and important private sector committed to liberal education guarantees that its interests are widely voiced and represented.

Revolutionary educational conditions in Europe have diverted some subsidiary attention to liberal education. Many European countries are now experiencing American-style problems in maintaining the type of advanced and specialized undergraduate education once deemed solely appropriate for universities. An increase in the number of students leaving high school with university qualifications and an expansion in the number and types of places offering higher education—an expansion that has accelerated since the end of the Second World War—have forced university leaders and academics, as well as government and civil service planners, to reconsider alternative forms of undergraduate education. They have discovered that basic or foundation year courses may be necessary. Further education colleges in Britain, roughly corresponding to community colleges in the United States, now offer a number of courses at university level. This has eroded historic distinctions between educational segments and led to debates about both how to fund the colleges and what to consider as appropriate academic work. The word “undergraduate” itself, a neologism of sixteenth-century England, is now commonplace in Europe to describe students in their first years at university, as if re-thinking the curriculum requires a different term to describe newcomers to the university experience.

Experiments in the design of undergraduate programs and new ways of conceptualizing undergraduate learning and teaching have appeared within the interstices of the European higher education system. A liberal arts college frankly modeled on American practice exists within the Netherlands’ Utrecht University. Programs in problem-based learning have appeared in the Netherlands and Denmark. Roskilde, near Copenhagen, has an intense and impressive undergraduate commitment that consists of student retreats, interviews, close advising, student-led evaluations, group projects, and meetings with representatives of the public.<sup>2</sup> Within the context of a law and business program at Sweden’s new university college of Jönköping, a fascinating and well-publicized liberal education experiment has resulted from the vision of a determined lawyer appalled by the poor general knowledge of his students. Here and there, advisory councils and philanthropies have formed to consider the requirements of undergraduate teaching and to iden-

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tify excellence in the undergraduate classroom. These concerns especially occupy the planners of new university colleges, who are given the chance to innovate without the drag of vested interests. German scholars who have either visited or studied in the United States have introduced versions of liberal education at home. Eastern European scholars, who bring a special perspective from their own recovered past, have joined the dialogue. The disintegration of the soviet empire has brought back into Europe countries hitherto excluded from association with the free democracies and eager to benefit from economic and educational reforms associated with progressive societies. The Smolny College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at St. Petersburg State University is the first of its kind in Russia.<sup>3</sup> In some cases, this association has led to the adoption of educational practices quite at variance with more recent history. In Japan too, interest in liberal education is heating up, although the national models there are uncertain. One of Japan's oldest and most prestigious private universities, Waseda in Tokyo, has just established a liberal arts college with an international outlook, drawing on American examples. How many of these departures and innovations can be confidently termed "liberal education" depends upon the context, the measure, the expectations, and the national experience to which the reforms relate.

To these indications of interest in a return to thinking about liberal or undergraduate education, we can add the influence of the European Union. The formation of a "United States of Europe," the easy movement of labor and services across national barriers, academic and student mobility, and scientific cooperation on a large scale have produced a call for a common set of educational requirements with features long associated with American undergraduate education. The fundamental purpose is to enhance employment opportunities and to promote even greater student and academic mobility by creating something approaching a common university system in Europe. The hope also exists that a common conception of citizenship will arise from changes in the structure of higher education. (In light of varying national traditions, educational systems, and languages, one wonders whether in the brave new world to come universities will have to commit greater resources to remediation—a point not normally encountered in the euphoria of policy studies.) The blueprint setting forth this agenda appears in several documents. One was issued at the Sorbonne Conference of May 1998. Another is the Bologna Declaration of June 1999, which sets forth the agenda for "A Europe of Knowledge...as an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship, capable of giving its citizens the necessary competences to face the challenges of the new millennium."<sup>4</sup> Guy

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Neave of the University of Twente in the Netherlands cautions that the Bologna scheme, while separating undergraduate from graduate instruction, is based far more on the British three-year first degree specialist model than on anything approaching the farrago (my word) of courses customary in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, transnational dialogue on liberal education has more meaning now, as Europeans dissolve parts of a particular type of elite higher education system and acquaint themselves with the challenging traits of a system more highly differentiated as to kinds of institutions, academic expectations, degree and diploma awards, part-time and continuing education, and types of student. In the new circumstances of Europe, flexible responses are sought; new interest and academic lobbying groups are formed. The exchange of views has become noisier, more public, and more irresistible to media that are alert to academic, financial, and social scandals. No consensus is possible. Some critics point out that flexibility may be just an excuse for abandoning a certain educational rigor that is incompatible with egalitarian demands and wonder whether the traditionally high standards of the European university have been compromised. Yet those who favor a more open approach to education and those who deplore the abandonment of a particular kind of academic style both turn to liberal education as a solution, even though their understanding of the term differs. What is sought, or what is discussed, is a form of education that takes account of both the personal needs of students and their future relationship with society. There is always the possibility, as happens in the United States, that this emerging and, in some places, established concern may not be for liberal education so much as for student services. But turning an educational assignment into an administrative one may be an outcome that is unavoidable in a state of mass enrollment. What is certain is that liberal education, however it is conceived and whatever traditions are recalled, will need to confront and accommodate a great many ideas, funding models, and structures with which it was once at odds.

## THE PAST, PRESENT, AND POSSIBLE FUTURE OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

Some of the thoughts expressed in the opening paragraphs of this monograph and in the pages that follow were explored in "An International Conversation on the Past, Present, and Future of Liberal Education," as explained in the foreword by Robert Orrill. At meetings in New York City in September 2000 and in Washington DC in May 2001, a group of scholars representing the United States, Scotland, England, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Sweden, Israel, Russia, Slovakia, and Ukraine met for the purpose of discussing the past, present, and

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future of liberal education, comparing national traditions and history. (Their names and affiliations are provided in Appendix B.) Our view was that while a comparative and historical approach to understanding issues as emotional and complicated as those associated with the magical phrase “liberal education” would not resolve all difficulties, the gains would still be substantial. Issues could be clarified, and stumbling blocks identified. Possibly also, the strengths and limitations of liberal education as appearing in free societies and in those seeking to be free could be assessed. I am pleased to pay tribute to a deeply learned community whose ideas and comments have been indispensable to me. Nevertheless, the observations and conclusions appearing here are not a summary or report of the “Conversation” but reflections and observations on what was said (or omitted) in the context of my own studies and experiences.

The general plan for this monograph is to reproduce the dominant characteristics of liberal education as a number of historical typologies, models, or categories and, from time to time, to distinguish the claims of defenders from reality. The typologies are familiar ones, chosen because of their frequent occurrence in discussions of liberal education. They are character formation, leadership, breadth, personality development, critical thinking, and general education. Other scholars will prefer a different set of categories, and I doubt that anything said here will deter them. In fact, I suspect that precisely the opposite will occur. But no matter which categories or models are chosen to illuminate the history of liberal education, all will display the contradictions, paradoxes, pious hopes, and special qualities that mark any cultural inheritance viewed, as the French are wont to say, in the long duration. I begin, as some writers do, with secondary education because it has always been a crucial determinant of how liberal education is conceived and taught at higher levels. I would in fact go further than some observers in saying that unless secondary education is given firm and solid support in any national program of universal education, higher education will have difficulty providing the type of education that is normally subsumed under the heading of “liberal.” That difficulty is most apparent in the United States. It is becoming apparent elsewhere.

Typologies are, heuristically, a useful means of analysis. They clarify themes that, in their actual historical versions, may not be so evident. At the very least, the typologies offer a way of noticing how many different and incompatible ideas get packed together in the usual discus-

*“Liberal education...will need to confront and accommodate a great many ideas, funding models, and structures with which it was once at odds.”*

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sions about liberal education. Admittedly the typologies overlap, or they appear to overlap. Do “breadth” and “general,” for example, actually refer to the same phenomenon? I don’t think so, but the reader will have to decide. I also leave it to readers to decide how many educational burdens a particular version of liberal instruction is capable of bearing before it succumbs to the impedimenta of time and circumstance.

History is, in some respects, an experimental laboratory for investigating the dimensions and dilemmas of liberal education. But its clinical limitations are obvious. We can never reproduce what is departed. Furthermore, an historical outlook inevitably reveals problems and paradoxes and can leave us hanging from the cliffs of indecision. These dangers notwithstanding, a survey of liberal education as transmitted via several national legacies opens up ways of imagining its uses in utterly altered circumstances. This, I submit, is an improvement over a familiar urge to create one’s own definition of liberal education, possibly drawing unabashedly from some admired past principle as if the course of time means little. Those who do not see the issues in their historical dimension have no difficulty in telling us exactly what a liberal education does or does not do. Much of the debate is therefore exhortative—advocating this or that subject, this or that approach, this or that presumed outcome—but without any supporting legitimacy beyond the rhetoric of persuasion or an appeal to a residual sense of idealism.

Overall, my weighting of the arguments is rather toward illuminating the American experience, both because of the attention paid to it historically, and because of the influence it exerts over the thinking taking place elsewhere. Precisely because other nations, not only in Europe but now also in Asia, regard the American experience of liberal education as a guide to their own educational futures, simplification must be avoided. Short-cuts are impossible. Each nation must consider, with glances toward the others, how best to incorporate the principles and structures of a liberal education into its own history and culture.



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## *II. Liberal and Illiberal*

### THE LIBERAL ARTS, THE HUMANITIES, AND LIBERAL EDUCATION

Eventually, all educational issues become curricular issues. Which subjects should be taught? Which disciplines should be involved? Much of the literature and most of the discussions automatically assume that liberal education means no more or less than subjects listed under the heading of “the liberal arts.” Do they include the “fine arts?” If so, music, the theater, and the plastic arts were certainly assigned to an inferior position in the “ranking of the arts” in Georgian England, being merely “ornamental.” Sir Joshua Reynold’s great aim was to elevate painting to a higher standing by recasting portraiture as history. It is unclear whether the liberal arts also include laboratory science or depend mainly upon literature, history, and ethical philosophy. The phrase “liberal arts and sciences” has been invented to handle a possible omission. Mathematics, so closely aligned with religious, cosmological, and philosophical thought, has always occupied a respected place in the pantheon of arts. Its inclusion has not been contested. Some commentators are confident that the phrase “liberal education” is synonymous with the word “humanistic” and that courses of study assigned to the humanities divisions of colleges and universities are the soul of liberal instruction. How they were placed there in the first instance is of little interest; a working premise is that the taxonomy must be correct. But the choice of subjects under the heading of a liberal education is not exactly logical in all respects. It is also the outcome of history, one result of a pattern of subject allocation decided upon earlier and subsequently protected by institutionalization and vested interests.

In the past, those outside the accepted canon of liberal subjects sued for admission. In the later eighteenth century, English chemists demanded inclusion on the grounds that chemistry was an aid to polite conversation—the proper use of a liberal education according to prevailing criteria. In the nineteenth century, the proponents of modern languages tried to convince the defenders of ancient classics that they too were liberal and not just the handmaidens of commercial interests, engaged in the teaching of subjects that were important for trade but no different, really, from double entry bookkeeping. Experimental science was long placed outside the liberal program altogether—the spectacularly brilliant and malevolent job of demolition performed by Jonathan Swift (1704) having a hand in this. Today, the experimental sciences are a valued, indeed, a dominant member. And other examples can be cited where the inclusion of a particular subject was accidental. The odd case of the teaching of Scandinavian languages at Oxford University in the nineteenth century, for example, resulted from a benefaction given to, but never used by, the university press.



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In the American colleges and universities of the nineteenth century, new subjects were often either shunted into separate and less prestigious degree tracks, or simply bundled off to alternative institutions where issues of their liberalism were inconsequential. In the chairholder system of the German universities, innovating specialties were taken far afield to other universities as their practitioners sought new professorial chairs. Professors protected their home territory. The desire to preserve a monopoly has an amusing twist in the case of a Berkeley professor of history, who, in the late nineteenth century, objected to the hiring of new colleagues on the grounds that he was himself capable of teaching all subjects. Even more amusing is a tale told of a professor of classics at the new land-grant University of Missouri. Desiring to make himself useful and to find room for his subject, he offered to teach a course in agricultural Latin. How liberal? Well, a case could be made....

Battles of the books, or, as Immanuel Kant put it, the conflict of faculties (in the European sense of subjects), and the contest for curricular supremacy are as old as the university itself. But it is not only the choice of a subject to carry out the plan of a liberal education that creates controversy. The method of teaching, the emphasis, the interpretations, and the lessons learned are equally contentious. In fact, these may be more central to the story of liberal education, more clearly revealing of the inner issues at stake, and more likely to expose the animating moral, political, and ideological differences. The culture and science wars of present-day America (or Britain) have many unique aspects, but they also have cognates in other periods in which educational values were at odds, and new audiences presented new challenges (Dejean 1997). At the very dawn of university history, an angry debate about how to teach logic galvanized the philosophers at two rival French institutions. Disagreements have been continuous over how classical texts should be taught: as practical lessons in statecraft and elegance of expression (Renaissance humanism); as grammar, syntax, and composition (the Cambridge tradition as strengthened in the eighteenth century); as history, literature, and philosophy (the Oxford tradition from about 1800); as philology (the nineteenth-century German tradition); very broadly and speculatively (the Scottish late Enlightenment tradition); for the purposes of scholarship alone; as examples of the best that has been thought and said in the world; as a source of wit and allusion; or as a sign of superior breeding. Each kind of classicism has had a phase, depending upon how Latin and Greek needed defending (Stray 1998).

Subjects and disciplines are protean; cling tightly, or they change aspect. Chemistry at Berkeley is taught in two structures—one denominated a department, the other a college—

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depending upon whether the subject is taught as pure or basic science or as preparation for a technical career. This is the orthodox distinction, I might add, that has hounded the history of liberal education and caused so much confusion and debate. The teaching of history provides even better examples of the elusive nature of disciplines. History is a humanities subject in some universities, while in others it belongs to the formal category of social sciences. Has it changed its content or purpose? And if history is taught within the mission of a law school or a business program or as part of social welfare, journalism, political science, or the policy sciences, which it is, does it remain the same kind of subject with the same kind of emphases that it enjoyed while in an autonomous department of historical studies? Lynn Steen of St. Olaf's College has made a similar argument with regard to the teaching of mathematics. By "stealth," mathematics has invaded all departments and disciplines and is taught with a different purpose in each. Neither "pure" nor "applied," it is indispensable to the way in which individuals must function in everyday life in contemporary civilization (Steen 2001).

*"History provides no assurance that the definition of a liberal education rests solely or primarily upon a particular set of subjects or disciplines."*

Mathematics is, consequently, very much a "living art." The same set of observations can be made of any subject conventionally denominated a member of the liberal arts that just happens to be taught in another type of institution—one devoted to technology training, for example, or musical performance. One might louse through the categories and structures of virtually any university and find ambiguities and uncertainties in the claims made for disciplines.

In general, the scholastics and glossators of the medieval university were in no doubt as to where to place the liberal arts. They assigned the language disciplines, three in number, and the mathematical subjects, four of them, to the "inferior" or "lower" Faculty of the Arts, centuries later renamed the Faculty of Philosophy in the German tradition. The seven liberal arts were the preparatory subjects that provided the basic reasoning methods required for mastery before the student could undertake serious study in the "superior" or "higher" faculties where law, medicine, and theology flourished. Liberal study was subordinate to professional education; it was necessary but hardly sufficient in an ideal educational scheme.

The preeminence assigned by Americans to the descendents of the medieval liberal arts, themselves the descendents of the Roman liberal arts, is the result of later historical developments, most notably in the Renaissance. Academies and grammar schools appeared as rivals to the Arts Faculty and competed for students. They taught the liberal arts as ends in themselves,

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not so much as preparation for professional activity but as the essential tools of the courtier-statesman-diplomat. Freed from their subjection to the requirements of the learned professions and reinforced by the revival of learning associated with the recovery of whole new areas of Greek thought, the liberal arts gained new life and meaning as practical education, this-worldly

*“The telltale identifying marks of a liberal education are the manner in which a subject is taught or learned, the spirit in which it is offered, and the attitudes that may just result from the teaching and learning.”*

and oriented towards the improvement of social communication. In this way the liberal arts became (again) what may be called the “living arts,” drawing somewhat away from medieval scholasticism and more towards ancient models. Eventually Renaissance classicism found its way back into the university, and classics, along with theology and mathematics, dominated the curriculum in many countries, including the United States until well into the nineteenth century and beyond, and in the schools that prepared pupils to become university students.

History provides no assurance that the definition of a liberal education rests solely or primarily upon a particular set of subjects or disciplines. History does suggest that certain conceptions of the end purposes of liberal education may be dominant at one time or another. But no conception is ever wholly overthrown and replaced by another. The Renaissance idea of a liberal education did not totally replace the medieval conception, which continued to find a home in the university. The capacity of the university model to accommodate various educational visions through internal structural differentiation is one of its extraordinary strengths and one principal reason why the academic community today has difficulty agreeing upon the curriculum and purpose of a liberal education.

If a particular subject or discipline or group of subjects does not constitute the essence of a liberal education, should the belief in a form of education different from the others simply be abandoned? What is it that continues to attract so many educated people to a conception of education that is historically flexible, sometimes paradoxical, and always elusive? A cynic would respond that the staking out of academic territories is a sufficient explanation. Under present-day funding conditions, some subjects are regarded as expensive luxuries. Their proponents understandably hope to retain respected places within higher education. It is true that academic self-interest is a factor in university decision-making, but a long tradition of searching for an

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education that provides special meaning to the human experience cannot be readily discarded. Liberal education does not have an easily identifiable essence. This is a methodological and philosophical “problem” in the history of ideas (Kimball 1986; Rothblatt 1997). But the fact is that no other form of education is capable of so thoroughly examining universal or even particularistic existential and moral issues. No other form of education is able to concentrate on the most important questions of how life is to be lived or how it is to be lived in relation to other lives. Liberal education offers the intellectual and emotional basis on which is constructed a capacity to make decisions. It is the means by which men and women have sought to interpret the world or to take a comprehensive view of it. There are other ways to say it. The president of Bard College, Leon Botstein, a distinguished symphony conductor, defines liberal education as “a sense of value that is beyond material gain, beyond wealth and fame and power. It is about the way you conduct your life both as a private individual and as a citizen” (Zernike 2002). These are some of the enduring ideals.

The inevitable conclusion is that the telltale identifying marks of a liberal education are the manner in which a subject is taught or learned, the spirit in which it is offered, and the attitudes that may just result from the teaching and learning. Any subject can be taught liberally or illiberally. The point will be made again in the different sections of this monograph. It may not be a coincidence to the reader but it is to me that AAC&U’s most recent publication on the subject of liberal education makes exactly this distinction. As its report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, puts it, “The philosophy of liberal education depends less on particular subject matter than on an approach to teaching and learning” (*Greater Expectations*, AAC&U, 25).

This working conclusion will not satisfy all readers. Many will still insist that one subject or another is superior in meeting the requirements of a liberal education and conclude that if method, approach, or the spirit of a liberal education are what basically matter, the door is wide open to every bogus claimant. That is true, possibly heretical, and certainly damaging to the organization of departments, institutes, faculties, programs, and other structural components of the contemporary college and university. Yet a review of the principal forms that liberal education has assumed over the centuries suggests that subjects or disciplines alone can never serve as the unchallenged bases of a liberal education. Some other variables have always been involved and were often crucial determinants.

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## THE LIVING ARTS

Words are encrusted with historical meanings. There is so much ambiguity and confusion about phrases such as “liberal education,” the “liberal arts,” the “liberal arts and sciences,” or the “humanities” that discarding all of them might be refreshing. They are often used synonymously—I do so myself out of convenience but also because they provide a recognized starting point for discussion. They are also historical terms, used in the past and therefore indispensable for understanding that past. All that can be achieved in a monograph of this kind is to point out how porous the phrases are and to hope that, even when used interchangeably, context will provide a clue as to meaning.

But if a new term is acceptable, or at least one that attempts to point liberal education to its purpose and can be mentioned in conjunction with it, then we might try using the “living arts” as a way of orienting a curriculum to a goal. The liberal arts are living arts in all meanings of the phrase: “living” because they still exist and are necessary ways of ordering human experience, and “arts” because they are practical and encompass every possible form of human inquiry and skill. In some historical periods, as indicated, the living arts bore a closer relationship to everyday behavior, if class-linked, than in others. *Belle lettristic* orientations were more important in some ages. Sometimes the purposes of a liberal education were formulated in a manner emphasizing detachment from society, ranging from unworldliness to a “series of disinterested encounters with traditions” (Ryan 1995). A vigorous engagement with social and moral issues in the arenas of public life is the dominant tone in yet other historical periods. Disinterest and commitment may not be mutually exclusive in practice, but reconciling them in a curriculum is difficult. One historian has gathered up the many themes and reduced the traditions of liberal education to double strands, one associated with oratory and the other with philosophy. These strands correspond to the medieval distinction between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*. Attempts at accommodation have been continuous (Kimball 1986). Relating the self to the social and natural worlds, actively or reflectively, does seem to be the central aim of most traditions of liberal education, but we are still left with the difficulty of organizing teaching to achieve the stated ends.

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### *III. Liberal and Secondary Education*

In the United States, liberal education is usually considered the responsibility of tertiary education. Historically, however, liberal education was the responsibility of schools. Yet, schools and universities in the United States were not always clearly separated. The age groups overlapped, and curricula now widely considered to be a function of higher education were located lower down. In the nineteenth century, the distinction was particularly fuzzy. Until the rise of mandatory schooling after 1850, colleges and universities created their own preparatory sectors. Sometimes, as in the case of the College of William and Mary, university buildings were used for schooling. Ultimately, the comprehensive model came to dominate publicly-supported schooling and, although tracking was eventually introduced, the distinction between those going on to education beyond school and those entering labor markets was muted compared to European practice. The confusion between school and university remains a feature of America's higher education system. The words "school" and "university" are still used interchangeably.<sup>6</sup>

When it was founded in the 1820s, the University of London created a preparatory sector. Undergraduates often used the new civic university colleges, which sprang up in England after 1850, as preparation for entry into the Oxford and Cambridge B.A. degree courses. In Scotland in the same decades, professors offered "junior classes," which were really schools, and some Scottish degree-holders, like their counterparts in the civic universities, matriculated again as undergraduates at the two senior universities of England. Eventually, all British universities were more or less brought up to a common standard, although quality differentiation is occurring at present.

One result of the blurring of lines between lower and higher education in the United States is the proliferation of remedial work at the university level, especially in English language and mathematics courses. Judging by the latest SAT<sup>7</sup> results, language inadequacies in particular continue to trouble educators and test-designers. Part of the reason lies in the very heterogeneity of American society. In a nation of religious and ethnic pluralities, one can hardly speak about Standard English as one speaks about French or about the Queen's English. When faced by issues of social diversity a century ago in a great period of immigration, Progressive Era reformers were eager to apply the principles of social engineering to the construction of a public secondary school system. They responded with an educational system that has made state-funded

*"One result of the blurring of lines between lower and higher education in the United States is the proliferation of remedial work at the university level."*

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schooling an unreliable academic ally of universities. The pronounced deficiencies have led to an interpretation of liberal education as skills teaching. At the moment, in the United States, Europe, and Japan, educators often speak about the necessity to improve reading, writing, and mathematics facility, equating these proficiencies with the primary purpose of a liberal education. This emphasis on technical achievements is congenial to societies so heavily committed to science and technology.

Part of the reason for the historic absence of a clear standard of high school achievement is also attributable to the existence of some 17,000 distinct school boards. The large inequalities in resources and differences in how to negotiate the demands of local communities have prevented the emergence of mandatory national standards guaranteeing academic results. American egalitarianism is another cause. Measurable differences in academic achievement are invidious. Furthermore, since standardized testing and test scores are important for entry to the most prestigious undergraduate programs, low achievers, disproportionately drawn from the least advantaged families of American society, are placed in an unhealthy position with regard to life chances. Hence, from time to time, there is a tendency in American liberal democracy to downplay the significance of meritocracy and competitive academic testing and to denounce both as unwarrantedly elitist.

In Europe, by contrast, schooling in the nineteenth century was differentiated into tripartite (in Scotland, binary) arrangements corresponding to the ambitions and achievements of pupils, and the line between school and university became firmly drawn over time. The last two years of high school were especially important in preparing students for higher education, and liberal education was considered to be the proper function of certain schools. The American-style comprehensive high school, much discussed in Britain even before the Second World War, is nevertheless a fairly recent introduction in a system of schooling where elite “independent” schools still dominate university admissions.

The advantage of a clear division between school and university is that it produces a corresponding division between the type and kind of educational programs offered in each. The European universities have hitherto been able to concentrate on what is known as “advanced” or specialized teaching. The rule is not hard and fast, however. The Scottish undergraduate honors degree, for example, is somewhat less specialized, the Norwegians have a foundation year of general studies (*philosophicum*), and variations exist in the French and Swedish



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systems. But the classic distinction still holds, or holds in attenuated form: Liberal education belongs more to schools than to universities. Within universities, the kind of liberal education received is influenced by the norms and practices of the research model. The shorthand description is that a university education is “scientific.” Because most pupils at school never went on to university before the era of mass higher education that began a half century ago, placing liberal education lower in the educational system made sense. It was there that preparation for living in the broadest terms could take place, and the small numbers that went forward into universities could receive their pre-specialized preparation in the final two years.

The distinction between school and university has been maintained in Europe by rigorous gate-keeping or school-leaving examinations, which are far more demanding than anything offered in the United States (Eckstein and Noah 1993). These often consist of two phases, an ordinary examination to complete compulsory schooling and a higher examination for those staying on to prepare for universities. Advanced-levels in England, the Highers in Scotland, the *Maturità* in Italy, the *Matura* in Austria, the *Abitur* in Germany, the *Baccalaureate* in France, the *Bagrut* in Israel are formidable barriers to prestigious postsecondary education. They have no true counterparts in the United States—except partially as ordinary examinations in New York and Massachusetts. The advanced “maturation” examinations are a rite of passage that marks the transfer from childhood to adulthood. Those who fail the examinations are, by this test, immature.<sup>8</sup> Those who pass are now mature and need no longer be subject to the rules, regulations, and impositions that control the lower stages of the life cycle. They can also claim to be “liberated” both in mind and from school.<sup>9</sup>

Of all European countries, Sweden has radicalized its educational system the most by using the American comprehensive school model and replacing the classic school-leaving examinations with continuous assessment at school. Eckstein and Noah (1993) rank Sweden close to America in departing furthest from school standards of academic rigor. Ekholm (1985) concludes that changes in Sweden have also altered the reliability of university preparatory education, much as happened much earlier in the United States.

*“The distinction between school and university has been maintained in Europe by rigorous gate-keeping or school-leaving examinations, which are far more demanding than anything offered in the United States.”*



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Among the reforms attributed to the brothers Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt, the institutional founders of the University of Berlin in 1810 (the spiritual founders were the idealists, neohumanists, and pietists of their time: Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Schleiermacher), none was greater than the resuscitation of the moribund secondary schools, or *Gymnasia*. Secondary school standards were elevated and tightly linked to higher education. The professors inspected these schools and made certain that close ties were maintained to universities. In fact, so close was the relationship that masters teaching in the upper secondary schools shared the same academic and philosophic culture as university professors. These reforms subsequently influenced all of European higher education. In France and in French-speaking Swiss cantons, the *lycée* teacher is still called *professeur*.

The connections between school and university have been particularly tight in France. The object of a French secondary education is *culture générale*, a variant of liberal education. Essentially, this is a serious introduction to public life meant to identify talent for leadership. Rifts have appeared, however, between those who see general culture as furthering a historic French republicanism and those who, more purely nationalistic in outlook, see its importance to France itself rather than to a particular kind of polity.<sup>10</sup> It is precisely the French retention of the idea that schools exist to teach a general culture that has kept links stronger between the *lycée* and university academics than elsewhere in Europe.

In parts of nineteenth-century Germany, professors ensured that preparation for advanced work was seriously undertaken by also teaching in the schools. Sweden too once had shared teaching; the *gymnasium* teacher and the university professor were united in a common sense of purpose. Until new systems came into operation after about 1850, Scottish professors inspected schools and kept them up to the mark, although the Scottish educational system, more committed to democratic access than other European systems (was Sweden a possible exception—there were numerous sons of farmers in attendance before 1850?), allowed headmasters more flexibility in devising curricula. In England, dons and beaks, the Oxbridge college tutor and the boarding school teachers and housemasters, were interchangeable until the twentieth century, when the profession of schoolteaching and the academic profession parted.

In all of these European systems, the upper secondary schools belonged, in a sense, to the universities. The current tendency in Europe is not only to break apart that commonality but also to reverse the flow of influence so that, in many respects, the university responds to the

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educational conditions created by the schools. In any country, the greatest exceptions to trends exist in the most select universities and colleges, those with brand-name recognition, traditions of excellence, a firm financial footing, little or no interference from politicians, and a capacity to resist populist or demographic pressure (Clark 1985).

The famous European gate-keeping examinations have undergone so many and continuous changes in the last twenty or thirty years that observers there doubt they can continue to function as effective instruments of meritocratic selection and guarantors of personal and academic maturity. Since the examinations have a downward as much as an upward influence, their weakening or the creation of various school-leaving examinations providing greater student choice means that secondary schools no longer have clear and consistent academic goals. This is true even where government ministers attempt to spell out the rules.

There are now alternate routes into higher education everywhere in Europe. Some link vocational schools with counterparts in the higher education network, while others lead to entry into the conventionally academic segment. In Sweden, for example, those who are twenty-five years of age and have worked for five years are eligible for admission to a research university, provided they are judged to have the requisite qualifications, and places are available. As changes occur below, higher education is called upon to provide a corrective to the deficiencies of schooling. This is as true from Britain across Europe to Ukraine as it is in the United States.

## A DIFFERENT QUESTION

We must ask a different question, one less concerned with meritocratic filters and their functioning, less directed at the important structural features of educational systems, and more concentrated on just what liberal education means when undertaken at school—even within the university-preparatory stream. Is liberal education more than a species of general education, rigorously pursued in some periods, topped with a few years of pre-specialization? Are we speaking mainly about fundamental skills or about introductions to subjects such as languages, biology, mathematics, geography, and history that involve interpretative, methodological instruction? What other outcomes have there been? Can we confidently conclude that those leaving select British and European secondary schools have been socialized to a wide variety of national norms, values, and beliefs or to that old dream of “high culture?” Our answers are not clear (except perhaps for France). What is clearer is that up to the present, and persisting in some Continental countries, the purpose of a school was, in the words of Sven-Eric Liedman of

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Gothenburg University, to certify that a pupil had achieved “mastery.”<sup>11</sup> Achieving mastery meant that the hurdle of school-leaving, gate-keeping examinations could be surmounted, and the pupil was now considered intellectually competent to go forward to advanced academic work consisting of specialized and professional courses. Beyond that, generalization is difficult.

The European system of upper secondary education may or may not achieve or have achieved all or most of the historic goals of liberal education. Assessing that would require a discussion of what liberal education means and has meant in the secondary sector. That inquiry has attracted less attention from historians than liberal education at the universities. But what the *Gymnasium* in its heyday unquestionably accomplished was to relieve universities of the need to provide undergraduates with the rudiments of general education and comprehensive skills. Consequently the European university had less difficulty than its American counterparts in defining missions and purposes. Less hesitation existed about what a liberal education was supposed to do at the higher levels because it was assumed that schools had fulfilled their duties.

In the public sector at least, a common academic culture uniting professor and school-teacher has not existed in America. The realities of American school board politics and community pressures have prevented teachers from fully utilizing the shared academic culture acquired during training (Clark 1985). No national gate-keeping examinations exist beyond what individual higher education institutions impose—notably for some, the SAT or the American College Test (ACT). In any case, the results of these are weighed differently by different kinds of institutions. There are no widely accepted notions of a mature student in the United States. College preparatory tracking at school has been severely hampered and attacked as elitist, and all but the most privileged colleges and universities must be ready to offer undergraduates compensatory instruction—either because students’ preparation is poor or because they have transferred from elsewhere with inadequate skills and proficiencies.<sup>12</sup> Given these failings, little that stands within the traditions of liberal education is discernible in all but the happy few of American high schools. It is now time to look more closely at other aspects of those traditions.

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## IV. Traditions of Liberal Education

### LIBERAL EDUCATION AS HOLISM AND CHARACTER FORMATION

The direct and expected outcome of teaching, according to a vision of liberal education dating back to the ancient Greeks, is the molding of character. The task of liberal education is to bring all parts of the personality—emotions and intellect, body and mind, style and thought—into harmonious integration. Anything less risks overdeveloping one part of the personality at the expense of another and produces unbalanced and dysfunctional human beings. A similar theory of character formation, disharmonious nurturing, formed the basis of Freudian psychology. Before then character formation also found an outlet in nineteenth-century faculty psychology, which regarded the mind as a collection of separate cortical regions. Each region was thought to control specific kinds of learning. Mental equilibrium resulted when a properly-trained teacher managed to develop all of the cortical regions to their fullest capacity. The theory was regarded as scientific and helped put pedagogy on a respectable professional footing.

Character adjustment was also a preoccupation of Romantic-era writers and poets who explored the effects on conduct of an education that ignored emotional health and the expression of feeling. The blame for personal inadequacies was invariably offloaded onto society and its institutions: on the family, on schooling, on universities, on the economy, on culture, on religion, on the political system.

Modern theories of alienation often begin with the related belief that, somewhere within the individual, a fully-rounded self or alter ego is buried and suppressed. As society is to blame for the half-person, the only possible recourse for the suffering individual is to change the structure of political and social authority through rebellion or revolution. In the 1950s and 1960s, writers on existentialism and politics often revived such themes. In the work of the Frankfurt School, especially *One-Dimensional Man* by Herbert Marcuse, student activists found an appealing explanation for the ills of contemporary society.

According to the theory of holism, the right society allows for the right kind of inner and outer harmony. Utopian writings often depend upon the assumption, which is why social stability, order, and authority, as well as regulatory “official” myths, are recurring themes in the construction of ideal and manageable communities.

For the ancient Greeks, both Spartans and Athenians, a just social order was only possible within the small city-state (women and slaves, however, being outside consideration). When character formation as the principal object of liberal education returned to western civilization

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in the Italian Renaissance, the city-state polity was again a prominent feature. The nineteenth-century historian Jacob Burckhardt located the origins of the multi-faceted modern personality in the Italian cities of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. He did so from the perspective of his own Swiss canton, a small, socially-homogeneous community governed by an urban patriciate.

The college, the city-state, the isolated and size-regulated utopian enclaves (and nineteenth-century planned communities and garden cities) provide the ideal settings for character formation, for the close influence of one mind and person upon another. By contrast, contemporary societies are large, often dense, and the individual is anonymous. The large universities of the present are often compared to cities. They encompass a vast diversity of types and ambitions, and they expect their students to shape themselves rather than to be shaped. The culture of the modern university features competition, consumption (i.e., bargaining), and confrontation, all of which are explicitly banned from utopias. Holism has difficulty flourishing in unstable conditions.

An argument can be made that holism is an entirely inappropriate educational ideal for modern societies, which possess none of the features associated with the ideal of small communities. It has no fixed and unchanging order. It is dynamic and unpredictable. Hence those who speak about the type of character required to flourish under conditions of instability mention self-reliance, adaptability, and creativity as the necessary ends of a liberal education. A balanced individual in an unbalanced environment being a logical impossibility, the conclusion follows that imbalance makes a better fit, that is to say, the nonconformist has a better chance of success than the conformist, being more willing to take risks, quicker to spot opportunities, and less apt to accept conventions as guides. As a deeply respected colleague of mine has said, "I can't imagine anything duller than a packed room full of valedictorians. They think the same way. They're overprepared."<sup>13</sup>

But let us assume that even under the anarchic circumstances of modern culture each of us prefers to achieve some high degree of inner harmony rather than always living on the edge, even the cutting edge. How is that to be achieved? One way adopted by the proponents of liberal education has been to begin the search for balance with the self rather than with society. Liberal education must then be flexibly instrumental. It needs to provide plentiful options for personal self-realization. It must also provide the individual with the type of knowledge (skills would be included) required to negotiate difficult and often hostile terrain. To "survive" rather than to flourish is a favorite metaphor.

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When the self and society are fully in harmony, designing a curriculum is easier than when they are at odds. The ends are known, the responsibilities of teacher and learner are clear, and the expected outcome guides the educational strategy. Furthermore, the curriculum itself is not as important as other dimensions of education that

approximate the world at large. Residential education is the preferred means, especially within a college where close interaction is possible, where students and teachers are in proximity, and where the socializing influences of a carefully constructed environment are preeminent. Contacts with peer groups, perhaps the impact of a seminal teacher, do make a difference with respect to personal growth and development. This became the Oxford and Cambridge

ideal, which lasted long and extended almost to the present. In the Anglo-American colleges and universities, a corollary to the residential idea was that some form of collective activity, team sports, for example, or journalism and the performing arts, was as important as the classroom in providing undergraduates with a coherent sense of their rounded possibilities.

Faith-related colleges in the United States have long been concerned with the question of education as character formation because of their desire to sustain a religious inheritance and to stimulate acceptable moral and spiritual perspectives. They typically have a strong commitment to liberal education, or to liberal education as they understand their inheritances. Large, secular institutions rarely have an interest in character formation. In fact, they are often implicitly hostile to the very idea. Research universities do not regard shaping character as their primary task, even if many American universities pay lip service to the importance of residence (and now ethnic or gender diversity) as an educational socializing influence.

The college as the central structure for imparting liberal education was once common to other countries, but except for England, which still has collegiate universities, the college form has not survived. Colleges have vanished from France and Spain. In Belgium they exist but not with university functions. Trinity College Dublin, the sometime educational home of the Anglican Ascendancy in Ireland, is today much more a research university than a college. Scotland's colleges no longer remain as independent entities; their vestiges are evident at St. Andrew's. While living away from home has usually been as important on the Continent as in

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English-speaking countries, the academic mission of universities was not to shape the whole person as understood in the Greek-Italian Renaissance-English and American traditions. Instead, the academic mission was to cultivate the intellect and to allow students to find their own form of self-understanding in the cities, in the boarding houses, in the German *Burschenschaften* (of which the professors actually disapproved but could not control), or in the Swedish student "nations" still very evident in present-day Uppsala University.

From time to time, the residence halls of large public universities in the United States are enlisted in the service of liberal education in the hope of providing a richer and less impersonal experience away from home. The measures adopted include resident graduate students as instructors, the use of the dorms for classroom instruction, and professors as fellows associated with specific buildings. But the present-day obstacles that must be overcome to revive an ancient hope are defeating. Problems in providing a secure housing environment, legal issues regarding the well-being of students, and financial matters are the center of administrative attention more than any active consideration of personality shaping, which, in any case, can be easily misunderstood. In recent years, the proliferation of speech codes and of rules and regulations governing personal relations, especially between men and women on campus, have added to the unease and the uncertainties of interpersonal behavior. Instead of an environment that has been designed to facilitate human communication and self-confidence, two expected outcomes of character formation, the opposite has occurred. A certain wariness has entered, and the occasional scandal, well-publicized in the press, dampens whatever enthusiasm exists for a collegiate experience within a large, mass higher education institution.

Norbert Elias (1978) would list the guarded relations between students, or students and professors, as the consequence of a particular kind of civilizing process, admirable in most respects but awkward in several. In reviewing the history of interpersonal relationships, he noticed that becoming "civilized" required a great element of self-restraint. Over time, the threshold of personal embarrassment was brought lower to make individuals more conscious of their behavior. Crude conduct once perfectly normal was now regarded with suspicion. Vulgar jokes and pranks that in the past occasioned mirth became unmistakable signs of bad taste and social class inferiority. Table manners, references to bodily functions, and careless language were carefully watched. The slightest infraction could bring down reputations. The positive benefits of such a profound alteration in the definition of civilized behavior have been partially offset,

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Elias seemed to suggest, by a resulting sense of unease in human relations, a fear of giving offense, a reluctance to be open and forthright. The outcome is ironic. Being civilized means being overly sensitive, hesitant, private, and insecure in public. The ancient ideal whereby holism engendered self-confidence is no longer tenable.

Any curriculum designed with character formation objectives imposes a heavy burden on teaching and campus administration. Instruction itself is not the difficulty. A personal commitment to the students' overall welfare is an implicit necessity, and this, in turn, requires a re-conceptualization of the academic role. The teacher becomes a worthy role model and assumes the responsibilities of *in loco parentis*. Who today wishes to be a moral custodian of students? And, given the legal and cultural constraints of modern university life, who is willing to be misunderstood? And professional careers are busy careers. Few academics are interested in devoting their time to the general supervision of undergraduates, nor, it is fair to say, are they competent to do so. They do, however, devote themselves to another style of socialization congenial to professional training.

For the university or college to assume the obligations of a parent requires a return to the years of parietal rules with deans of students empowered to enforce them. There is some evidence in the United States that parents would like universities to act in some capacity as guardians of their children and would like to be directly informed of difficulties, academic or otherwise. Yet, university administrators are reluctant to permit what they interpret as interference, and in some states legislation actually forbids releasing information about any student past the age of eighteen. In so many ways, the entire culture of the modern university is organized against any view of liberal education as involving the shaping of character.

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Is this to be deplored? The answer depends on how one regards the functions of a university in the two centuries after the academic revolution made in Berlin. Lord Annan, a celebrated and exhilarating Cambridge don and the heir to Edwardian beliefs in holism and the college ideal, nevertheless turned his back on the entire notion of character formation as the primary function of undergraduate education. Holism, he concluded, was not only impossible; it was an educational distraction. He took issue with the notion of the university as a place for culture, for the inculcation of beauty, wisdom, goodness, or the qualities needed for politics and business. Most of what occupies academics today, he said, is secondary, to "include the agonies and gaities of



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student life.” He continued: “A university is dead if the dons cannot in some way communicate to the students the struggle...to produce out of the chaos of the human experience some grain of order won by the intellect” (Annan 1999).

A worthy objective certainly, and one that fits with the current organization of studies and academic career ambitions. And yet, the idea that a form of education exists that will refresh the human personality, that will indeed take us towards culture, beauty, goodness, and a commodious sense of the self, refuses to depart. The idea is alive as an idea because it contrasts an organic with a mechanical view of human potential and provides an alternative to education as a set of measurable skills and proficiencies, or the ideal student as a valedictorian. Ancient ideas may not be realizable, but, presenting us with a reassuring vision of personal worth, they continue to reappear in unlikely guises.

One such unlikely appearance is in the quarrel over high-stakes testing in university admissions that has distracted the academic community in the United States for several years. Those who favor a different approach to selection advocate a total assessment of an applicant’s record, taking into account social, personal, and other non-academic indicators of potential merit. This is holism, but the circumstances for its re-introduction have been created by a very modern conception of society as the sum total of plural ethnic communities and social classes. No such conception existed in the orthodox classic definition. There was one paramount conception of how to be human and one universal community. How to be whole within it was not in dispute.

## LIBERAL EDUCATION AS LEADERSHIP

As one of the oldest traditions of liberal education, preparation for political leadership dates back to the Greeks and is connected to holism and character formation. The concern that a leader must acquire an understanding of the psychology of behavior, comprehend human nature, and be able to persuade without resorting to demagoguery can be traced to authors who dealt with the dilemmas of Athenian democracy. The ideal tunnels under the centuries, however, and reappears in more modern times under different guises. Leadership aims are featured in all aristocratic theories of liberal education and, especially after the founding of the American republic, also in democratic ones. In France, leadership preparation for administrative responsibilities in government, industry, or education is still an object of education but not university or liberal education. The avowed intention is to produce a technocracy trained in engineering, statistics, economics, and the policy sciences. A select tier of postsecondary institutions, the famous

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*grandes écoles*, were created first in the mid-eighteenth century and then taken over and extended by the Republicans and Napoleon, who was distrustful of clerical control of universities.

In the United States, leadership preparation has been problematic. Using vague definitions of leadership, many colleges and universities claim to be places for producing leaders. Apart from management programs in business or public policy and other professional schools—normally, if not invariably, at graduate levels—leadership is not an obvious goal for liberal education in any country. The disciplinary basis of undergraduate instruction is not aimed at articulating the qualities required for the exercise of leadership. This is also true of the more interdisciplinary programs and of other national university systems.

It would be difficult, in any case, to determine how a leadership quotient could be introduced into the undergraduate curriculum. How many academics regard themselves as leaders in any case and feel themselves capable of identifying the means and materials useful for teaching the subject? And which courses would be most suitable? At one time, historical study was said to be a school of statesmanship. The emphasis was on the role of great leaders or on the shapers of statecraft and foreign policy. But the growth of other forms of history, social and economic, has shifted interest away from a study of leadership as the actions of outstanding personalities. The larger determining forces of history, issues of social and gender conflict, geography and demography, or the dilemmas of culture have taken precedence. Leaders are now seen to be reactive, or as acting within set boundaries. They are no longer regarded as free agents exercising a clear and decisive judgment. Rather, they are considered to be the captives of party, voters, special interests or, more vaguely (yet accurately), circumstances.

Moreover, they are no longer praised as moral paragons, examples of courage and probity inspired solely by duty and service. Self-interest, power, reputation, money, a hidden life of deal-making, and self-indulgence attract biographers interested in selling a sensational story.

The conclusion that a liberal education was preparation for leadership developed in connection with top-down decision-making in societies where politics was the avocation of the few who were pre-selected or favored by social convention, a “natural” aristocracy. The exercise of leadership in societies that combine democracy with market forces is a far more problematic

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issue. It appears at the heart of the Federalist debates of the late eighteenth century. Would-be leaders, or those already in office, are conscious of the need to please or woo voters and defer to public opinion.<sup>14</sup> The impossibility of reconciling an aristocratic code with a democratic one possibly accounts for the nineteenth-century switch in emphasis within liberal education. Eventually leadership was subsumed under a general notion of citizenship with a faint indication of public obligation. In time, citizenship was further enlarged to encompass all kinds of ordinary behavior for which education was useful. To be educated as a citizen meant that an individual had acquired the necessary understanding of how to live in society, how to make decisions, how to obtain employment, how to relate to others, how to be a wary consumer—in sum, how to manage in everyday life.<sup>15</sup> I have heard colleagues in the Netherlands define citizenship as the result of access to secondary and higher education without reference to an older code of civic responsibility. Citizenship in this understanding is a right, the right to education without ensuing obligations.

For those who still cling to the belief that the liberal arts are a suitable preparation for leadership in society, industry, or government, the hope is that in some indefinable way a broad outlook (could it but be acquired) would be adequate preparation.

## LIBERAL EDUCATION AS BREADTH

For all writers, breadth is the preferred theme of liberal education. It too is related to holism. Those who are whole have been prepared to take generous views of human conduct and to avoid the sort of narrow and class particularism of which Matthew Arnold wrote most memorably with subdued passion in mid-Victorian England. He went on, as did other writers on education of his day, to show how breadth of outlook was synonymous with a social type, as was its opposite. But breadth as commonly advocated today is an attribute of intellect far more than an aspect of personality, for all the reasons provided in the earlier discussion of character formation. Modern education concentrates, in its higher phases, on the training of intellect as a necessity of its survival.

Liberal education is said to encourage wide views. Further attributes easily follow. Liberal education strengthens the mind and furnishes it with perspective, judgment, independence, and a tolerance of other viewpoints. By contrast, an illiberal or servile education (vocational or even professional education is usually meant) is said to be limiting and even denaturing, tied exclusively to occupation and career. One studies essentially what one needs to know for particular

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applications, and wider speculations are discouraged as possibly amusing but needless distractions. Vocational instruction is said to constrain the intellect. It cannot “liberate” the mind, the happy conclusion that proponents of breadth purport to derive from the Latin word for “free.” One social fact behind the distinction is that, in ancient Hellas, vocational education was assigned to slaves. By association, their education was servile. Liberal education was assigned to the others, who were destined to devote themselves to their public duties.

Within the medieval university, breadth was defined as the language, mathematical, and reasoning skills needed as preparation for the higher professional learning. As noted earlier, breadth was the purpose of the lower or Arts Faculty. In Europe, from the Renaissance onwards, breadth was also the responsibility of schools. But lest we exaggerate the type of breadth featured in schools of the great period of cultural efflorescence in Italy, the analysis of Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine (1982) is sobering. In an enlightening article, they argue that schools did not provide a liberating experience. Rather, it was old-fashioned hard slogging and dull repetition. If the materials were liberal (e.g., the liberal arts), the teaching was hardly inspired. Breadth was usually not much more than what we term basic skills or proficiencies—reading, writing, speaking, reasoning—combined with the methods and exercises for promoting those skills. It was not breadth of outlook. As new subjects entered the curriculum—such as laboratory or empirical science, social science and, presently, computer literacy—timetabling, squeezing it all in became and remains difficult.

A deeper and nagging question usually omitted from discussions of liberal education remains: How broad, in fact, is broad? Each subject discipline within the present-day university offers a different version of breadth. Academics are eager to teach their specialties; some teach them as preparation for graduate studies, a modern day version of the medieval university’s lower faculty. Some academics are absolutely certain that undergraduates are not receiving a broad and, hence, liberal education in courses other than their own.

Excepting cores that follow a standard syllabi designed by cooperating teams and some carefully-created programs, such as Contemporary Civilization at Columbia University, the St. John’s curriculum, that of Roskilde in Denmark where consultation and feedback are built into course design, the fact is that in the United States we have no measurement of breadth that is applicable to all the subjects of the undergraduate curriculum. We have no systematic way of comparing different versions of breadth. We assume that it is being provided in the distribution

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requirements and introductory courses. But let us for a moment take the generous perspective and say that breadth happens, unsystematically perhaps and inconsistently, but that it does go on. It even happens within specialization itself. Specialized knowledge has its own momentum. It is true that continual cell division is one of its properties, leading to the creation and establishment of sub-disciplines. But specialization also encourages a particular kind of breadth easily overlooked in the debates about broad and narrow learning. Knowledge moves laterally as well

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as deeply, encroaching upon other disciplines. The scholars who intoned before the adolescents seated on benches in the medieval university were not afraid to stray intellectually, to ask odd questions out of simple curiosity and wander off into semi-heretical directions that bore no clear correspondence to the subjects of examination. Abstruse speculation, and other forms of imaginative inquiry taking place within the confinements of the Arts Faculty, eventually played an important role in the rise of modern experimental science. It is hard to imagine that intellectual work in a reasonably free environment can possibly be restricted to the narrowest kind of teaching and thinking.

However, this is a description of breadth as the haphazard result of teaching and learning; this is not what is customarily meant by liberal education as, essentially, breadth. We normally mean that breadth is more than a collection of courses or a basket full of needed skills. Instead, it is a habit of mind that allows us to distinguish between trivial and significant issues and answers, to select and discriminate. Breadth is a way of combining disparate forms of knowledge and of making connections between different categories of information. It consists of imaginative leaps, sudden inspiration, and a willingness to let arguments develop openly. Consequently, we have no guarantee that breadth can be obtained through course reconstruction alone. The challenge is much greater, and teaching is as critical as any combination of subjects or any manner of cores. No one can correctly argue, although it is done, that a three-year honors degree in physics at an English university is less of a liberal education than the pastiche of distribution requirements conveniently assembled in most American universities to help undergraduates prepare for what comes afterwards. An overload of credit units, with students calculating how much effort to put into particular courses, is not necessarily superior to a schedule that is less cluttered and allows scope for curiosity.

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Breadth is present in all understandings of liberal education. It is part of holism and character formation. It is an aspect of the self-development incorporated in the German cultural notion of *Bildung*. Arguably, it is an element of individual self-realization, the desire to rise above oneself and be freed from the small concerns of everyday life. But it is taken for granted as the outcome of an undergraduate education, and that is a lazy error.

## LIBERAL EDUCATION AS PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

The conception of liberal education as personal development is more Anglo-American than Continental, and more American than British. Its origins lie in nineteenth-century Romanticism and liberalism. Individual autonomy and freedom from society or the state are its main components. Insofar as nineteenth-century philosophical or political liberalism was parallel to economic liberalism, the one reinforced the other. The conjunction produced a variety of educational ideas quite inconsistent with traditions like holism and character formation, where self-development was never personal but derived from models and types.

The new theory introduced several radical and contradictory features into higher education. The first, derived from economic liberalism, made education into an item of consumption, purchasable from a list of course possibilities on offer. This also reinforced the democratic element in American life. Individuals were to be given the authority to make choices for themselves. Hence we find early on in the nineteenth century that Mr. Jefferson's University of Virginia was the first institution in the United States to experiment with course electives, a practice abandoned a few years later when students were inadequately prepared at school to exercise the authority so freely granted to them. Yet once secondary education was better established, a principle was available that could be taken up later with greater success at Harvard. Education, historically almost always top-down, defined by the institution or the instructor, acquired a bottom-up dimension. The student was allowed to express tastes and preferences, however much honored being quite another matter.

Earlier I noted that, under modern conditions, the burden of personal development rests upon the individual. The elective movement was based on that understanding, reinforced by a democratic ideology. But until a certain point was reached in the maturity of the student, there remained a critical role for the teacher. The premises of faculty psychology and the existing realities of adolescence, as well as pressures from families, provided a special incentive for teaching. The student being as yet immature, still coming of age and lacking judgment and discrimina-

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tion, was to be led toward adulthood. This reversion to a more conventional view of liberal education, explicit in the idea of holism, was nevertheless different. For whereas in holism individual self-development was based on known models, in the new theory there were no set types. As every student was regarded as special and unique, the function of the teacher was to set out alternatives and to assist the student in finding the ones most individually appropriate and congenial.

Americans educated in Germany in the nineteenth century encountered another view of self-development that many were misled into thinking was the equivalent of their own democratic and individualistic preconceptions. Less pragmatic, or at least more philosophical, more willing to encourage speculation, more intellectual and closely associated with European norms of high culture, the German universities were envied by American scholars. The libraries and educational resources were astonishing. The visitors from abroad admired, or thought that they did, the aesthetic and spiritual ideal of improvement incorporated into the ideas of *Bildung* and *Kultur*. *Bildung* developed within the context of societies with strong centralized governments, social hierarchies, and patrician standards of taste. Self-development was based on conformity to the highest available cultural models but, as an arduous *process* of seeking, it was possibly indeterminate (Liedman 1993). The standard might never be reached, but it functioned as a beacon to which the wanderer was drawn. Depending upon whom one reads, the standard was either national or universal, distinctly German with chauvinistic elements, or applicable to all nations and societies (Ringer 1969). But in any case, *Bildung* was both close to holism and distant from it—close because it advocated development according to a general standard of excellence, distant because it was an aesthetic not a social or political notion of shaping. Scholars disagree on whether Humboldtian ideas of *Bildung* incorporated a dimension of public service, of which Humboldt himself was an exemplar; but foreign visitors to nineteenth-century German universities noticed how unworldly the German mandarins appeared, appropriate enough, they might have concluded, given the autocratic features of the German state. There was little of the *vita activa* which remained a possibility in Britain and America.

The unworldliness of the German view of self-development became a concern of the Allies who occupied West Germany after the Second World War. British and American leaders concluded that the great defect of German education was the absence of a practical moral direction. Germans, it was decided, had not been schooled to accept responsibility for decisions. Accordingly, as part of a process of “re-educating” the population of what was now occupied



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West Germany, liberal education programs were instituted in most universities. These included lectures and discussions designed to stress the importance of moral choice and the consequences of choices and was intended to purge the country of its Nazi past. More attention was paid to where students lived—the housing shortage contributed to this decision, as did an increase in numbers—and the kinds of associations and clubs to which they belonged. Plans were even discussed to create “colleges” with professors as heads and wardens for the students. This focus on the total environment in which students studied, invading their historical independence to live where they wanted and associate with whom they desired, was often resented. But it did produce a great variety of architectural and planning innovations (Muthesius 2000). This was holism in the Anglo-American spirit and quite out of keeping with the history of the German university.<sup>16</sup>

Differences between American and British notions of self-fulfillment, however, should also be considered.

While both societies inherited an individualist ethic, the British version was less open-ended and less democratic in outcome. Thinkers like Matthew Arnold had excoriated the results of a heavy commitment to individualism, to doing as one likes, as he called it. A standard was necessary, and in this respect he admired both German and French education. Liberal education in Britain was used to create a leadership, administrative, or governing class with shared values. Liberal education in the United States was used to encourage an individual autonomy consistent with the making of a free society. The American version of self-development, almost always personal, was predicated on the belief that everyone is unique and should be allowed to develop a unique route to self-determination.

The downside to any liberal individualist theory of personal development is what ethical philosophers call self-referencing. The standard is what pleases the self, the focus is inward. Alan Ryan, today at Oxford but for many years at Princeton, has commented on the frequency of narcissistic themes in American novels, the characters obsessed with personal feelings and responses (Ryan 1995). It is not surprising, therefore, to find a reaction occurring from time to time, including today. The typical response is an expressed longing for a mandatory integrated curriculum, at least in the first two years, with an orientation towards public service and social

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responsibility. Some advocate the compulsory teaching of ethics as part of the liberal arts curriculum, or business and medicine, or comparative religions. Community service, which seems to have a mixed record in providing long-term commitments to social amelioration, is offered as a contemporary version of the ideal of “public virtue” contained in the leadership and citizenship aspects of liberal education. Several colleges offer course credit for undergraduates undertaking various kinds of outreach. “Multiculturalism” is the favorite remedy of others; but this term has several meanings and is enmeshed in ideological controversies, ethnic disputes, and issues of national loyalty. The main object of all such programs and reforms is to move away from an over-reliance on personal development as the principal end of a liberal education in favor of a more open commitment to the welfare of others, to society, or to the democratic political process. That, at least, is a possible and generous interpretation.

The efforts to build a service ethic and a sense of moral responsibility into the liberal arts curriculum have not significantly altered the primary structure of higher education. Overall it remains faithful to the great reforms of the late nineteenth century. Indeed, it is difficult to understand how the situation could be otherwise for the majority of universities and colleges. Disciplinary specialization and sub-specialization are an unstoppable process because knowledge cannot grow in any other way. Contemporary scientific and technological discovery require that knowledge be patched together from close and precise investigation. Actually, specialization is inherent in any process of knowledge acquisition, in any age or period. Or, as Alfred North Whitehead once maintained, specialization is natural to thinking. It is an indispensable element in a building-block approach to learning and a method of determining accuracy in research. Within the major itself, sub-specialism is also unavoidable. If liberal education is seen as somehow in conflict with contemporary ideas of knowledge pursuit, then we will have to conclude that the struggle to find room for liberal conceptions of education within the university or college is permanent and unlikely to succeed.

## LIBERAL EDUCATION AS CRITICAL THINKING

The word “critical” always appears in contemporary discussions of liberal education. The argument that the primary purpose of a liberal education is to advance critical learning or improve “critical” skills or methods is not self-evident, however. The word is variously employed to indicate a general reasoning capacity, the ability to exercise independent judgment, to recognize contradictory information, or to mark the absence of essential data. To be critical means to

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distinguish between opinion and views formed through the exercise of the disciplined intellect. "Critical" also describes a questioning attitude, or it can refer to specific analytical methods, e.g., the "critical theory" of postmodern scholars.

Today, we also mean that the critically trained intellect can analyze the deficiencies of society, examine the success of social policies, promote a culture of dissent as essential to the health of free societies, and identify trends that appear to be wrong and misguided. Individualism encourages a critical outlook, and self-realization advances it. For precisely these reasons, we must conclude that for centuries liberal education had no such essential purpose. On the contrary, liberal education in patrician cultures was meant to sustain the dominant value system not subject it to hard inquiry. Flatter the prince if necessary, said the Renaissance humanists in warning what would happen if the prince's subjects failed to do so. They also observed, without providing a helpful answer to the difficulty, that the prince would be able to recognize flattery for the hypocrisy that it was.

The educational code was that of the courtier, aesthetic but superficial. The idea that liberal education was needed to reconfigure social institutions, question the prevailing political system, or identify moral ambiguities, contradictions, and anomalies is late historically. It appeared when western society was ready to challenge the workings of its fundamental institutions, unafraid that such questioning would result in devastating challenges. In short, it appeared when the conception of "progress" worked its way out of the Enlightenment. At that point, new knowledge and new methods of investigation became necessary and legitimate.

More than any other single factor, and more than any prior tradition of liberal education, the evolution of the research university itself has furnished modern society with the defense that the exercise of a fiercely independent critical outlook is its signal attribute. The research university appears in current writings as the enemy of liberal education. It is accused of forcing premature specialization and inhibiting the development of general education courses. It is salutary to remember that without the critical methods and scientific attitudes developed within the German university, and by the great late Enlightenment thinkers of the Scottish universities,

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liberal education would be pretty much bereft of one of its major justifications. Moreover, the freedom to speculate, which liberal education has acquired from the research ideal, has also led directly to the present-day conceptions of academic freedom and institutional autonomy from which liberal education has so profited. The argument that the basic commitment of universities is to discovery, to pursuit of the new, to taking nothing as sacred or given, requires the kind of protection implied by academic freedom. No absolute academic freedom exists anywhere, nor can any institution funded from the public purse or by donors and users expect perfect institutional autonomy. But to the extent that these exist in free societies, the research university, not the traditions of liberal education, must be given pride of place.

No one disputes the supposition that the mind cannot be liberated from prejudice and narrow understanding unless instructed in how to think reasonably, logically, and independently upon central issues and concerns. We can surmise that participatory democracies especially require citizens who are educated to see life clearly and to see it whole. We can agree that a critical education underlies other aspects of liberal education, such as citizenship or leadership, and we might agree that liberal education is more than a skill or proficiency and more than general knowledge. But like breadth, the shaping of the critical mind requires more than experiments with courses, whether we term those experiments interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, or trans-disciplinary. It too is a habit of mind that can only be acquired through long and hard exposure to the correct examples. Or perhaps critical thinking is just another cliché, obvious and convenient; possibly it is a claim without substance. It may not be a particular attribute of liberal education but, instead, an intrinsic part of higher education, present as much in the medieval university as in any contemporary representative.

## LIBERAL EDUCATION AS GENERAL EDUCATION

Inevitably, we arrive at the troublesome issue of liberal education as general education. "General" is partly a synonym for breadth; but the use of another word is itself an indication of uncertainty about the utility of "liberal." As it has been used in America since the 1920s, the term "general education" lacks the appeal of even an ambiguous word like "liberal." It is flat and colorless. It does not, in itself, immediately suggest anything special, anything liberating, anything with echoes of an ancient belief in the power of education to transform individuals by encouraging them to rise above themselves. The proliferation of knowledge, the different ways in which even the fundamental subjects can be taught, and the contrasting views that discipli-

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nary departments have about how general and specialized teaching differ have not made the task of creating a general course of studies particularly easy. A consensus being impossible to find, the resulting compromises leave few members of colleges and universities satisfied for very long.

Presumably, it is easier to develop a general education curriculum for schools than for higher education. There at least, general education can be regarded as the inculcation of basic skills, with each repetition at a subsequently higher level introducing more refinements and layers of complexity. But at tertiary levels, in a universe of burgeoning disciplines, sub-fields, methodologies, and conceptions, general education can be little more than a selection of courses with a few that are mandatory. However, in today's highly charged ideological environments, mandatory courses are often regarded as politically motivated. Consequently they frequently lack legitimacy. Even if that were not the case, ordinary scholarly disputes and tribal preferences would hamper the effort to design a common, compulsory curriculum.

The phrase "general education," admittedly unavoidable when discussing concepts of liberal education involving "breadth," should nonetheless be recognized as tepid. It is a desperate effort to come to terms with the most pronounced feature of the American higher education delivery system, its fragmentation into a collection of discrete courses or modules of lesser or greater specialized teaching. The word "course" is another example of lexical difficulty because its use in other languages does not necessarily correspond to what Americans see as a basic unit of instruction. A "course" can be of any length, or it can be a program of studies, whereas in the United States it is invariably a self-standing, term-long seminar or lecture. The first degree is composed of a certain number of courses, or, in a variant that appeared later, of a certain number of credit units based on hours of instruction and the distribution of courses.

Odd that no historian has undertaken a systematic study of a revolutionary innovation that marked a major departure from British and European practice. Before the spread of term-length "courses" in America in the later nineteenth century, undergraduates customarily proceeded through the university by cohort, taking the same program of degree-based studies throughout four years. But once the break with the past system of instruction occurred, more changes were possible: honors alternatives, individual projects, more choices for students even within requirements. Younger academics eager to establish careers on the founda-

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tions of a specialty now had some scope for doing so. Credit could be assigned to courses, facilitating student transfer, a vital aspect of the American educational opportunity structure. The die was cast. The American system of higher education became market responsive in the most accurate sense. It was not a collection of institutions passively responding to outside pressure, not even a genuine “mirror” of its society, as a distinguished president once contended (Johanek 2001). It was an active player and negotiator in the higher education market, where supply and demand competed for supremacy in the curriculum.

The strengths of the American courses system are various: The classroom teacher is relatively autonomous; such freedom provides the flexibility to make course alterations, even instantly; students can for the most part, even within the major, choose between a large number of modules; student success is not dependent upon any one course but upon a summary of all courses, a poorer performance being balanced by a superior one; and transfer is facilitated. The drawbacks are that the instructor is vulnerable to pressure from students to revise grades and assignments, that head counts may be taken as a factor in determining whether a course is given, and that no common academic standard prevails across the network of modules. Such coordination or integration of courses that exists is usually limited to building-block sequences, as in the study of foreign languages and mathematics. Nor are course work-loads uniform.

The origins of the American course-credit system are obscure, yet several factors were very likely primary. The first was the desire on the part of university and college teachers to raise academic quality, notoriously low by European standards in the nineteenth century. The second was the growth of market discipline and the subsequent necessity for universities and colleges to attract fee-paying students by diversifying subject offerings. The gain in flexibility was probably a victory for a democratic conception of learning, each student now having a chance to study subjects of choice. Students could also transfer courses from one institution to another. What was lost, however, were the features that underlie virtually all present-day statements about liberal education, summed up frequently as curricular coherence and integrity. Alarmed by the damage wrought to liberal education by the modular system, Americans then scrambled to create the distribution course structure for the first two years of university as still practiced by many institutions today. But except where cores are attempted, or team teaching, problem-based learning, or other experiments in achieving breadth, what remains is really only a collection of discrete modules. General education it might be, but is it liberal? Can a phrase so bland as

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“general education” capture the rich, complicated, and contradictory historical search that “liberal education” even at its most ambiguous entails? Does it suggest the intricate process of relating self to society described in these pages? Is it supported by centuries of allusion and reference, by an appeal to heritages lost or floundering?

The structural contrast with a bygone Europe could not be greater. Modules did not exist. Credit-units, a later feature of the American system, did not exist. Teaching and examining were distinct. Those who lectured and supervised did not provide the ultimate assessment. In the German system, the *Länder* or the central government controlled and administered the final examination. In Britain, universities provided the terminal examinations, which involved external examiners and blind marking. There was no appeal from the decisions rendered on Judgment Day, as it was known in England. In a real sense, the tutor, lecturer, and professor were freer than their American counterparts; they were isolated from the pressures that a student could bring for preferential treatment.<sup>17</sup>

The advantages of such systems were quality maintenance, low administrative costs (simplified record-keeping), and the greater freedom of the student, especially in lecture systems in Germany, to wander about from professor to professor and from university to university, to waste time, to mix in cafes on the Left Bank, and to read at random. Unlike their “immature” American peers, who were locked into numerous courses with continuous assessment, European students were, after all, “mature.” Even within the tutorial systems of Oxford and Cambridge, where teaching was aligned to a syllabus from which examination papers were taken, there was scope for intellectual exploration. No one was required to attend professorial lectures after the weekly tutorials. Nor was the fact that the undergraduate curriculum was more specialized really a barrier to obtaining breadth. Three to four years with relative freedom to read widely, to attend lectures at will, to pursue a whim or new interest, even within the confines of a single subject, and to join up with other students provided plentiful opportunities for wide-ranging inquiry. For what indeed was a “single subject” curriculum (or several subjects in Scotland)? What, in the final reckoning, was “breadth?”

But the classic European system is today edging towards the American, except where it is most entrenched. Course credits of some kind, with considerable flexibility of assignments and timetabling, exist in the Swedish universities, once more closely associated with the German system, if not in every particular. While external examining still remains strong in Britain, the

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type and nature of terminal examinations are being re-considered, and more weight is being given to student papers and other assignments. There is even an appellate procedure in operation in Scotland, where students can challenge their final assessments. There is growing concern that secondary schools are failing in their historic function as guardians of higher education standards, allowing only the best students to go forward. As in America, the definition of a qualified university undergraduate is being modified, with elite selection partially giving way to a broader definition of academic competence, and competence itself doubted by those who fear the consequences of abandoning the goal of mastery.

These trends suggest that as many of the features of the American higher education system are now prevalent in Europe, general education will indeed be the reigning substitute for liberal education. Whether that will satisfy the requirements of liberal education for breadth of outlook, wide understanding of the human condition, and some form of self-fulfillment in line with past understandings, remains a matter of opinion.

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## V. Liberal and Professional Education

### COMPATIBILITIES

Specialism and professionalism are closely related, at least from the late nineteenth-century onwards. Specialized competence is the root of professional recognition under modern conditions. The university began as a place for professional training with liberal education performing a propaedeutic function. Many professions developed outside the university in practitioner-controlled environments, but eventually all or most were incorporated into universities. Even many liberal arts colleges, or five-year smaller universities without research missions, now offer instruction or degrees in subjects that are more professional than liberal, as conventionally understood. While several sociologists point to the growth of applied subjects as a dominant feature of research universities, the argument can be made that the university has always been, first and foremost, an institution for applied learning. The number and variety of applied fields has changed over the centuries. Universities and liberal arts colleges are not the only type of higher education institutions. Polytechnics, business colleges, conservatories, arts schools, and medical universities are also essential components of any nation's higher education package. We must conclude that liberal education accounts for only a portion of postsecondary education offered in the world today. But we can also conclude that new possibilities exist for a fusion of two types of higher education often regarded as antithetical.

We cannot avoid considering how liberal and professional education intersect. Some sort of accommodation is necessary if liberal education is to be viable as preparation for living, for otherwise occupational preparation, driven by market concerns, will continue to influence the structure and purpose of all forms of teaching. Accommodation is also necessary if the career, so encompassing and demanding under modern conditions, is to provide a satisfying way of living.

A union of liberal and professional aims was a feature of the nineteenth-century German university (to be distinguished from the *Hochschulen* or polytechnics, which today are *Technischeuniversitäten*). The German university developed as a specialized institution, its mission of original inquiry inspiring all other universities and scholars. But specialism was to be guided by a higher purpose. The close and intense study of a body of knowledge, it was assumed, would lead in time to further insight into the human condition. It would actually, if undertaken in the proper spirit of *Bildung*, widen the perspective of professional practitioners. In German philosophy, *Bildung* was a lifelong quest for illumination; its origins were drawn from seventeenth-century religious pietism. The outcome is not appreciably different from what



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writers and thinkers like Burton Clark have observed about the anfractuous character of disciplinary specialization. It is, at one and the same time, the close and expert examination of problems and an opportunity for incorporating the methods of adjacent and even remote disciplines: literature borrowing from psychology and anthropology; political science using the insights of behavioral science; medicine drawing heavily from nuclear physics and cell chemistry. Bioengineering and medicine, but also mechanical engineering and medicine, are working together. Philosophy has been influenced by mathematics (to the chagrin of those interested in ethics and aesthetics). History is a universal recipient, open to the perspectives of any subject that brings light to the human experience, which all do in one fashion or another (Clark 1993).

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We cannot discount the possibility that the road to liberal education and to breadth is through a porous professionalized specialism, arguably a more natural road than artificially cobbling together different disciplines.

No consensus exists as to whether or how liberal and professional education are compatible. Those who are particularly committed to what they call liberal education insist that it is qualitatively far different from, and opposed in purpose to, professional qualification. Those who teach in professional schools may or may not desire a change or two toward liberal education values, but most are presumably satisfied with appointments that usually pay better than in the liberal arts and provide opportunities for expert consulting or, as in some areas today, lead to a seat on a company board or an entrepreneurial role in a start-up. Some submit that, as liberal education itself has been co-opted by the professional and graduate schools, any discussion of their lineage or connections is moot. Liberal education for all intents and purposes does not exist. But the point maintained earlier that the historical record indicates that no subject can be ipso facto defined as "liberal" or "servile," suggests that each form of higher education can assist the other. The fundamental question is whether liberal studies are in fact liberal or professional courses illiberal. Generalizations are hard to come by, for we have no accurate guidelines for weighing the liberal quotient in professional education or the professional quotient in liberal education.

Again, we need to return to a nagging reality. Any type of study may be taught narrowly or broadly, imaginatively or unimaginatively, in plodding or exciting fashion, in ways that further the

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art of making connections or in a manner that stifles all possibilities for encouraging large and spacious reasoning. No subject was more narrowly taught than mathematics at Cambridge University in the 1820s and 1830s (unless it was Latin), yet the generation of Charles Darwin and other luminaries was enthralled by the teaching of a private coach named William Hopkins. He transformed a dull grind into an exhilarating set of imaginative intellectual possibilities. Hopkins went on to acquire various academic distinctions. We could argue that liberal education as preparation for living provides professional education with perspectives other than career advantage, and professional education offers liberal education an opportunity to adjust its orientation to practical concerns and issues.<sup>18</sup> There would still be room for what John Stuart Mill advocated as a liberal education: following the argument whithersoever it went. Some of us suspect that the formal, codified barriers that separate American programs of letters and science in universities from the adjacent professional schools are poor guardians of the idea of a liberal education.

A comparative approach points up the overlap that can occur. Two unusual examples are offered, one drawn from American medical education and hospital practice, the other from professional training in Ukraine during the soviet period. Michael Burrage, relying on an analysis of medical education by Charles Bosk, has noticed how the guild norms imposed upon medical interns during their hospital phase of training fall within a definition of liberal education as character formation. A failure to observe “normative values,” such as punctuality, a spirit of sharing, responsibility, and deference, are judged more severely than technical errors, which can be attributed to inexperience. In order to join the ranks of a professional community, the intern/apprentice must demonstrate that he or she has the requisite moral character to become a fine representative of the craft. In this reading of the history of professional education, occupational preparation is necessary but hardly sufficient (Burrage 1993). The neglect of personal development because of an over-concentration on technical proficiency was labeled servile by the ancient Greek writers on liberal education. Similarly, the English barrister of the Victorian and Edwardian periods was expected to be liberally educated (unlike solicitors), a gentleman as well as a lawyer. Status reasons were of course factors; but the point remains that occupational proficiency was not the sole distinguishing feature. In Germany the expectation was that any well-educated professional person would be *Gebildet*.

If we leave behind ideas and practices associated with America or Europe and travel eastward, we encounter yet other examples of professional education that actually possess a liberal

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dimension, if by a curious kind of default. In the former Russian Empire, persisting well into the soviet era, the professional education that occurred within universities was actually in total conformity to such liberal education values as breadth of understanding and familiarity with a wide range of intellectual ideas. It was philosophical and speculative. The inefficiencies of the communist economies meant that professional education might prove worthless as career preparation. Why not, then, use those years to secure a rounded and personally edifying education?

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education than was hitherto evident.”*

Students reading for professional degrees, and their professors, took advantage of the freedom that job uncertainty caused to acquire an education inspired by the intellectual models of the German university. By contrast, professional training that took place within specialized institutes was far more narrowly focused. In the experience of Oleksiy Panych of the Donetsk National University in Ukraine, the students who received

professional instruction at the universities regarded it “as a way of everyday living and being an educated human being.” The irony, as he recognizes, is that as the principles of an open market penetrate into the former soviet republics, a sharper distinction may arise between liberal and professional education than was hitherto evident. Panych is especially alarmed by the consequences for the teaching profession and the education of teachers, and he fears that the situation will deteriorate beyond redemption if western models (as he hears of them) prevail.<sup>19</sup>

Many years ago, a brave dean at Berkeley proposed a total elimination of the conventional administrative boundaries between professional schools and the College of Letters and Science within the university. He advocated re-forming them in mixes that better captured affinities and linkages. As “invisible colleges” already existed, facilitating cross-departmental and cross-institutional interchanges, he assumed that a reconfiguration of teaching structures would be both logical and welcome. His proposal was quickly rubbished by the faculty. Such an institutional revolution, admittedly unpredictable in its results, was predictable in requiring a reconsideration of salary differentials, teaching hours, and, in some cases, the academic calendar itself. The proposal’s fate was instantly sealed, but it pointed up the illogic of the university’s “letters and science list”—the distinction between courses acceptable for a B.A. and those deemed unacceptable. Anyone looking closely at the list would wonder why architecture, with its ancient history in the liberal arts, social work, which draws heavily from sociology and demography, the health

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sciences, forever linked to the basic sciences, or city planning, which utilizes all the social sciences and many of the humanities fields as well as the physical sciences, should be kept at bay as lying outside the liberal arts. Students find ways around these rigidities and force the regulations to be bent and adjusted. But the list is insisted upon because it protects disciplinary perimeters, because it would be disruptive to rethink the education offered in universities, and because it is virtually the only way in which the research university can translate the confusion caused by the endless cascading of knowledge into a dream about the necessity of liberal education. Confidence in alternative routes to breadth and the development of the self is not widespread enough to overturn the structural barriers across which, in some cases, human curiosity will defiantly leap.

The professions and liberal learning are united because the first is composed of the disciplines of the second and because both address issues of living. In the deepest sense, both are applied knowledge. Possibly, the time has come to eliminate certain troublesome inherited distinctions between pure and applied knowledge, liberal and practical education, distinctions that are already disappearing from research undertaken in the age of high technology (Gibbons et al. 1994; Nowotony et al. 2001). To address the existential dilemmas arising in a remarkable period of scientific and technical discovery requires the fullness of knowledge. Recent biological and, indeed, cosmic theories have led to new ethical puzzles about the origins of life. Medicine has prolonged life, but it has not removed the inevitability and pain of aging. The high mobility of present-day society has serious implications for the integrity of families and communities. Legal systems are called upon to render decisions in cases that are new to juries and judges and for which no precedents exist. War and conflict, pandemic and endemic, require some understanding of human tragedy, torment, and aggression, of the reasons countries wage war and the consequences, of the sources of anger and their results. As voters in free societies, we are asked to choose leaders who also must confront new situations. These are practical issues in the sense of being real. They may not be resolvable in every instance, but they cry out for comprehension and for a sober sense of human possibilities, or even for catharsis. How sad it is, says the melancholy Persian grandee in Herodotus' history of the wars between Greece and Persia, that the human mind can fathom so very much but is powerless to alter the course of events. We can rephrase the sentiments to make them less despairing. How sad it is that we can change so little, but how extraordinary that the mind can understand so much. And whether we regard liberal education as the exercise of the critical intelligence, breadth, general knowledge, or holism, there

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is a connecting thread: the fear of being narrow, incomplete, denatured, and out of touch with oneself and society. Professional education puts us into society. Liberal education helps us understand society.

## SERVICE

Despite the specialist basis of professional qualifications, the qualities regarded as essential to being liberally educated resemble those required in the professions. Focusing on professional education as a form of vocationalism sharpens the distinctions, as seen from one point of view. But focusing on another aspect of professionalism lessens the differences. The professions carry with them an ideal of conduct that is as strong as any appearing in liberal education, that of honorable service and devotion to the public good. Historically, the professions bridged the gap between canons of liberal education and the market economies of western society. It is possible to look at the history of the organized professions from the perspective from which some scholars view class, as self-interest and job protection as represented by guilds, monopolies over entry, examinations, and other devices for constraining particular markets. However, it is also possible to view the history of professions as occupations designed to alleviate distress, to provide assistance, or to assure quality in the resolution of tasks.

In many ways, the failure of professions to behave according to the high standards they profess is a more serious moral violation than the manipulations to which entrepreneurial activity is prone. The shock throughout the academy is great whenever investigative results are falsified, research funds are misused, evidence is withheld, quarrels break out over who should receive credit for original work, plagiarism or the careless reporting of discoveries occurs, appointments and merit decisions are made on political or ideological grounds. When Princeton University admissions officers recently hacked into Yale University's computerized admissions records, the motive was at first unfathomable. If, under the pressure of fame and competition, academics and staff behave in this way, what moral lessons are being sent to students? And what then is likely to happen to one of the most important principles that professions and universities share: the privilege of self-regulation born of a commitment to a code of honor and trust?

There is always the expectation that profit governs business. Risk-taking and skirting the boundaries of the permissible are accepted, however unenthusiastically, as requirements for entrepreneurial success. But they are not welcomed in the professions. When the profit motive or self and institutional aggrandizement is seen to govern the conduct of professional men and

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women, the conclusion is that business values have replaced the codes of ethics that are professional hallmarks. However simplified these distinctions, they do indicate the existence of different expectations for different occupations.

Income is important to professions, especially wherever the gentlemanly ideal of living well has been important. But professions are not expected to pursue material gain to the exclusion of service, which includes *pro bono* service. Whenever business corporations are asked to assume a sense of public responsibility, not only in how they conduct their work but also in how they advance the general good, they are in fact being asked to behave as if they were governed as much by professional as by market values. A recent article in *The New York Times* (September 15, 2002) reported that some university business schools are now screening applicants for evidence of their overall moral qualities, their character, their honesty in reporting data about themselves, and their potential for unbecoming conduct. This is not only a reaction to the recent scandals in corporate America; it is also a renewed realization that professional values and universities have a long and interconnected history in which personal qualities are important.

## VALUES AND ETHICAL CONDUCT

The issue of values and probity is one that cuts across liberal and professional education. While it is more attenuated in some periods than in others, it is always present and invariably reappears, especially at moments of intense institutional scrutiny. All of the traditions of liberal education that I have discussed—character formation, breadth, critical thinking, self-development, citizenship, and leadership—involve the inculcation of values. The living arts could not do otherwise, since conduct of some nature must always follow from education. Liberal education tries to elevate the standards of conduct, sometimes by reference to the whole person, sometimes by offering an ideal of personal self-realization, sometimes by advocating a standard of high culture, sometimes by claiming that breadth of outlook is the best way to repair the world, or at other times by asking the liberally educated to put the wider above the individual interest. Leaders are urged to be wise, tolerant, careful, brave, sensitive, and fair-minded, but also to be trustworthy. Professional education shares these aspirations but assigns them to the particular professions.

AAC&U has often produced materials relating to moral responsibility and civic roles. In *Greater Expectations* the Association asks that moral reasoning be a common element in education so that a conscious attention to values becomes a natural part of life and work. A recent issue of the Association's *Peer Review* (Summer 2002) is devoted to the question of values in

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higher education. The most difficult problem, however, is determining how entire institutions are to undertake the task of assuring that students recognize a moral issue and have the intellectual resources to examine it. Recent polling suggests an amoral generation confused by contradictory information and media manipulation, and by rampant conceptions of ethical relativism. If true, universities and colleges have a heavy teaching obligation, but whether the professors are up to the challenge is problematical. Part of the confusion experienced by students also arises from the mixed social and moral messages offered in classrooms and the blurring of distinctions

*"Suspicion about the motives of colleagues is common now in American colleges and universities. Distrust is at a higher level than I can ever remember."*

between fact, interpretation, and advocacy. Messages about values are transmitted either directly or indirectly, as evidenced by the way in which questions are posed, material is selected, examinations are conducted, issues are explored, or, more fundamentally, how students are treated. Small colleges continue to attempt to provide first-year courses that are systematically created as opportunities to explore issues where ethical conflicts appear. Large

institutions are more handicapped, and the supremacy of the modular system ultimately leaves to the individual teacher the question of what values to teach and how to teach them. The result is a wide variety of political and personal views about social issues and their resolution, about religion, patriotism, capitalism, socialism, welfare, the role of government, and the responsibility of individuals, families, corporations, and schools. Suspicion about the motives of colleagues is common now in American colleges and universities. Distrust is at a higher level than I can ever remember. Well may one question whether this is the proper environment for promoting a view of liberal education as involving the living arts, of professional education as requiring a service commitment, or as higher education as a repository of a nation's best thinking about itself.

## CROSSING DIVIDES

But all is not lost. By recognizing that professional and liberal education share a commitment to right thinking and good living, we can at least admire the experiments that are currently being undertaken to resolve the problem of the separation of disciplines. In particular, we can admire those experiments that try to incorporate an appreciation of what, in ancient times, was known as the human condition. Today, these issues are more commonly seen as existential. In past times, they were regarded as the special concern of stoic philosophy and religion.<sup>20</sup> The secularization of the research university in America and Europe, the transformation of theology



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into just another discipline, have removed a body of knowledge from the undergraduate curriculum that, for thousands of years of recorded history, was the main channel for gaining perspective on pain, suffering, and meaning. As the research culture permeates private colleges and universities in the United States, the effects are apparent. A common fear of scholars is that teaching about religion, and possibly comparatively, means teaching religion in ways that lead to indoctrination and dogma. It is, therefore, a violation of liberal education's obligation to liberate the mind. It would be foolish to deny this fear; there are examples of its consequences. But all teaching has the potential for indoctrination and the assertion of particularistic truth, political, moral, and social as well as religious. The only safeguards are the canons of evidence and proof and the commitments to objectivity that arose in connection with the research university, ironically now responsible for what a distinguished scholar has called "established nonbelief" and a new kind of secular intolerance (Marsden 1994).

There are many new programs combining professional and conventionally liberal arts and sciences subjects. Keeping abreast of them is difficult, not only because of the huge number of educational institutions in the world, but because the history of such programs tends to be ephemeral. Academics tolerate them to quiet nagging colleagues, knowing that the innovations will in any case be marginal. Students express initial enthusiasm but then leave, running off to fields and majors more closely tied to career aspirations and known benefits. The "Tusman Program" mentioned earlier was regarded as too demanding. But the experiments born of the restless nature of higher education and the new demands upon it continue. Several may be mentioned here as articulating present-day concerns in America.

The Center for the Study of Science and Religion at Columbia University, for example, is notable for its attempt to marry theology and science in understanding the human condition. It unites biological science and a humanistic emphasis on the importance of dealing with lived experience. It also crosses the lines between professional and B.A. degree programs. The Center possesses a certain unity by virtue of its attention to cardinal human issues, and it aims at the gaining of wisdom that invests many of the traditions of liberal education with their deeper and more thrilling aspects. It joins scientists and theologians with the medical sciences; and as the community of participants is small, the Center possesses many of the advantages of elite education. The National Science Foundation has funded AAC&U's program called "Science Education for New Civic Engagements and Responsibilities," which has the object of linking science to applied social issues and recalls one of the historical purposes of liberal education: to



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prepare individuals for a life of public virtue. Whether this will prove to be more than getting students to think about ecology, or will be able to avoid the political disputes that discussions about “science and society” produce in today’s polemical environment, is a vast unknown. These are American examples; but this monograph has noted that the spirit of innovation is alive also in Europe, which is arguably experiencing its greatest period of educational change since the establishment of the Humboldtian model of a university in the nineteenth century.

Personal views of departures from the familiar organization of courses will undoubtedly vary, but the process of boundary redefinition is already a fact of life in many countries, especially in the newest European universities where vocational innovations are a major aspect of the curricula. A larger point is easily stated. We live in an era that is struggling to reshape structures in accordance with changes in the existing map of learning. Those changes have come about both as a consequence of internal disciplinary development, as the result of science and technology, which reign supreme in our day, and in response to social and political events and controversies. As our knowledge grows, our comprehension of how the world functions also changes. The ensuing knowledge overload presents enormous difficulties of assessment, selection, and interpretation. Whether the experiments undertaken in various countries constitute authentic maneuvers within the historical traditions of liberal education is a decision that program designers will need to consider.

In my own wanderings, I find heartening examples of institutional leaders who are trying to imagine what a campus devoted to a full appreciation of human qualities might be like. They are sensitive to the notion of a total or learning environment. They are proud of new buildings and ground designs that incorporate principles of learning and living. The adaptive re-use of older structures and older sites—a hospital at Frankfurt, for example, or the brownfields turned to educational use in inner-London—surely need to be included in the efforts by architects, planners, campus leaders, trustees, or donors to express the ideals of knowledge in symbolic and encompassing forms. The point was made at the outset of this essay. The towers of Corbusier that went up on many campus sites in the 1950s and 1960s are the unhappy consequences of regarding educational territory as just so much square footage to accommodate numbers and diminish the size of a building’s footprint. They remain and doubtless will have mates. But the strong and impressive efforts that have been undertaken in Europe and America, or Australia and other countries, to make the built environment conform to the comfortable dimensions of learning are positive and forward looking. Insofar as they express the fullness of human aspiration, they occupy a deserved place in mainline traditions of liberal education.

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## VI. Caveats and Questions

### CAVEATS

This monograph weaves between pessimism and optimism in setting forth parameters of the history of liberal education. It identifies strands that have vanished, others that live in quite special forms, others that present difficulties rather than solutions, and still others that express a yearning rather than a fulfillment. I have suggested that the historical change from a university mission centered on the dissemination of knowledge to its transformation has created difficulties for inherited conceptions of liberal education, although in one or more particulars the change has been salutary. I have also maintained that liberal education has experienced difficulty orienting itself towards a mass rather than its customary elite audience. I have further argued that with the notable exception of the small college, itself a descendent of the elite tradition of liberal education, or several kinds of collegiate experiments, contemporary academic culture is not hospitable to liberal education. I would now like to reflect upon a different aspect of the history and circumstances of liberal education, asking whether formal education is the only means for achieving some of the historical ends.

A signal feature of the history of higher education is the tendency, common to schooling as well, to burden institutions with innumerable responsibilities. Schools, for example, perform all kinds of non-educational functions once offloaded onto other institutions. They are parental substitutes, health clinics, psychological testing services, recreational facilities, and loci for the performing arts. Many of the obligations of higher education are contradictory in purpose, and all of them are rivals for resources and attention. Can single institutions, the comprehensive model of a university in vogue most everywhere, undertake technical, professional, and liberal education simultaneously, dividing the lives of most professors into three parts—or, rather, five if we recognize a further division into graduate and undergraduate studies? Can a single institution offer quality education at all levels, as judged by peer review, and in every department, as is the aim of celebrity institutions? Even sometime single-function institutions no longer restrict their activity to the purposes enunciated by their founders. They too have expanded their offerings and curricula. American liberal arts colleges, while rather more focused on undergraduates, often add a fifth year of master's work, and occasionally the doctorate, and diversify their courses to bring in newer emphases. The amount of commitments

*“We may also be overestimating the extent to which the goal of liberal education as preparation for living is only, or primarily, a higher education function.”*

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by academics has mounted. And the deterioration in staffing ratios as a consequence of declining sources of revenue—not everywhere, it is true, and by no means in all subjects, but widespread enough to cause concern—promises even greater time demands. Compared to the teaching and research efforts undertaken by academics in the nineteenth century, the energy exhibited by the modern professor is little short of astonishing. The novels and biographies of past university life reveal an under-utilization of professors and much boredom. I once queried whether present-day stamina and initiative were the consequence of better health and nutrition or the result, which I think is true, of more rewarding varied careers and far greater incentives. Nevertheless, the burden of achieving all-around institutional distinction may take its toll.

Costs will act as a constraint on university growth even as demographic pressure increases. Research institutions will want to protect their graduate and professional programs possibly at the expense of undergraduate instruction, which is another reason to consider how to integrate liberal and professional education. Public institutions in Europe and the United States, and particularly in Britain or the countries east of the Elbe River, already are experiencing major difficulties in

*“Do the academic baroni  
underestimate the extent to  
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countries are finding interesting  
and significant ways of liberal-  
izing their education, almost  
unknownst to their teachers?”*

attracting sufficient revenue to remain abreast of expenses. Private and public institutions in America are feeling the effects of declining income from investments. Once again, the issue of overburdening campuses with unrealistic aims has to be imaginatively rethought.

But in all of our wishes for the fullest type of undergraduate education, reflecting some rather extraordinary and unrealistic ambitions, we may also be overestimating the extent to which the goal of liberal education as preparation for living is only, or primarily, a higher education function. Historians of nineteenth-century education considered in its broadest dimensions have noticed how much educational activity took place within reading circles, trade unions, urban clubs and associations, churches, amateur theatricals and musicals, and even temperance societies. These were all places where people gathered to improve their knowledge and socialize. Universities, eager to tap new markets, created extension programs for these audiences. The first courses offered by University Extension at the University of California-Berkeley were in agriculture, a suitable task for a land-grant university, but also on Shakespeare. Today extension divisions around the country still offer a great variety of edifying and practical courses, but they are heavily driven by

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revenue concerns, industrial contracts, and the provision of services. Thomas Bender warns that, in the nineteenth century, “many of the finest American voices for liberal education did not have one in a university...[Liberal education] was not a phase of life; it was a part of the ‘self-culture’ idea for which Emerson spoke.”<sup>21</sup> Historians of popular culture will have their own conclusions about the extent to which the high culture of the European tradition and the ordinary culture of everyday life shared common elements. G.H. Young, arguing for the overlap in Victorian England, once made a persuasive case for a vital “middle brow culture” very much influenced by the leading writers and artists (Young 1962). Estimating the degree to which this ideal of self-improvement still exists is impossible. The media-driven, commodified mass culture of today, say its detractors, is just entertainment and diversion. And others point to the phenomenon of “bowling alone,” of individuals avoiding the forms of social interaction that marked the great popular institutions of a century ago.

Still, we cannot give up on the idea that voluntary efforts at self-education and edification are occurring outside institutions of learning. There is no reason to suppose that, with the greater resources available to wealthy societies today, much of what we might well include in liberal education for undergraduates or their mature student equivalent is available in some other form. Lifelong learning, elder hostel, and numerous other programs are well patronized. It is true that retirees have more leisure. But we should not dismiss the likelihood that younger men and women are, within the boundaries of their busy lives, actively trying to learn new things relating to living the good life.

Do the academic *baroni* underestimate the extent to which undergraduates in all countries are finding interesting and significant ways of liberalizing their education, almost unbeknownst to their teachers? Whereas half a century ago few went abroad or to other countries, travel, as mentioned earlier, is now common. Television and electronic media bring the world, or a world, into everyday life. Students today come in all sizes and personalities. Under conditions of mass education, we cannot expect every student to exhibit the curiosity that leads into unsuspected intellectual byways. Some have other obligations—family, work, personal circumstances—that compete with the time available for study. Before the nineteenth century, it was mainly those without any obligations who were able to meet the costs of a university and obtain a university education. Nevertheless, even within the limits of mass higher education, students are eager to learn, and some take the most abstruse and unlikely courses, delve into exotic languages, and

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wander into lectures remote from any hint of an anticipated career. As the late Joseph Katz of the State University of New York-Stony Brook used to say, students are naturally interdisciplinary. He doubted whether the professors were.

Discontents with higher education are widespread because we expect so much from it and because we find few sources of agreement on central issues of politics or values. Colleges and universities are places of controversy. To disagree is almost a requirement of academic life in any age. Disputes over interpretation typified the medieval university. The knowledge revolution and the proliferation of methods of analysis that arose in the nineteenth century legitimated differences of opinion as the best means for producing discoveries and getting at truth. The difficulty today is that disagreement is often intensely partisan. Truth itself is irrelevant because we have so many intellectual means at our disposal to contest every definition of it. In these circumstances, the stand-alone course-credit system developed in America and adopted elsewhere represents the ultimate trade-off, since differences between instructors need never be reconciled where courses bear a minimal relation to one another.

In view of my earlier remarks that universities may not be well-positioned to provide liberal instruction, the following observation will appear contradictory. It can be argued that despite all the structural and disciplinary barriers that characterize the contemporary university, the very existence of universities as places of innumerable interests means that students have more opportunities than ever before to learn about themselves and others. If the reconciliation of courses is impossible in a system of modules, then at least a single dogma cannot prevail. That is one benefit of the system. In the push and shove of courses and requirements, examinations and exercises, temptations and hype, in the range of personalities who populate campus sites, we may possess a hint of the world outside. No one reading these pages will accept the suggestion that colleges and universities offer a liberal education simply by being there, great kindergartens of toys and experiences, possibilities and frustrations. That is too passive a formulation and removes the necessity of active intervention into the spirit and facts of the curriculum. But the suggestion is offered in the context of understanding just what liberal education may mean in our time and in many nations with traditions that continue to tug at the academic soul.

The most sobering thought of all is that we can never be certain whether anything we teach by as grand a name as liberal education will have the planned and desired effect. We know of the famous graduates. Historians have studied cliques and knots of intellectuals, scientists, and

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scholars. But most graduates are lost to history; their biographies are never recorded. This includes most of the graduates who went to elite institutions in the days when those numbers were truly small. We need to be cautious and limit our claims. To assert that a liberal education automatically makes one into a moral and reasoning person, judicious and forbearing, is to ignore those with the finest liberal arts credentials whose lives have been shameful. This conclusion, expressed in language strangely overlooked when all of his other lapidary remarks are frequently quoted, was reached by the writer of the greatest study in the English language of the purposes of a university. John Henry Cardinal Newman, in concluding his discussion of the liberally educated gentleman in what remains a *summa* of nineteenth-century thinking about universities, reminded listeners and readers of a disturbing fact. He compared St. Basil and Julian the Apostate. Both, he wrote, “were fellow-students at the schools of Athens; and one became the Saint and Doctor of the Church, the other her scoffing and relentless foe” (Newman 1976). In other words, the exact same liberal education produced two vastly different moral outcomes.

## QUESTIONS

My caveats are not, however, intended to render useless all discussion of liberal education as a university function. Instead, they are offered in an attempt to move its direction toward realizable objectives. If we cannot know the exact effect liberal education may have on students in their lives after graduation, we do know that seriously designing and conducting liberal education programs is a positive university undertaking. It energizes interested faculty; it generates imaginative responses and enthusiasm. And enthusiasm—even the opinion surveys show—is a great stimulator of student interest. So, for those willing to follow the discussion in this monograph and to take up the challenge of defining the subjects and structures of a contemporary liberal arts program, I offer three large topics for consideration.

First, I propose taking another look at the institutions of secondary education and their role in furthering the ends of liberal education. Present circumstances allow us to rethink the relationship between school and university, a relationship that has vexed the institutional history of liberal education. The question of intellectual and emotional maturity is foremost. How much maturity can we expect of late adolescents anywhere? Is the knowledge base now so vast, are the issues of living so complex, that schools cannot be expected to provide more than their medieval forbears, an education in basic reasoning skills and some sort of general knowledge that is preparatory for studies at the next higher levels? Public disenchantment with state sector school-

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ing has led to the unprecedented growth of expensive private schooling, home schooling, magnet schools, controversial experiments with vouchers, and charter schools, whose record is still under scrutiny. But it is hard to imagine a nation-state the size of America wholly composed of schooling experiments and private alternatives. What exactly should be the role of higher education in strengthening and reforming the lower forms of education? The neglect of public schools by higher education is not an option. The weakening of European secondary education suggests that liberal education, positioned in the higher education structure by default in America, may also find a future home there in Europe for the same reasons.

Second, I propose a review of the principal objectives of liberal education as historically identified. Which seem appropriate, which irrelevant, which realistic, which in need of better definition? Which have been overlooked? Despite our mixed views on the synergism of liberal and professional education, I am particularly interested in how liberal and professional education are joined (supposing they are) or may be joined (supposing they are not). In any event, I welcome views on why, how, and if they are different, bearing in mind the importance of national contexts.

Third, what should we teach as essential to a liberal education, and how should we teach it given the constraints of our educational systems, their divisions, units, methods of financing, and patterns of assessment and evaluation? What happens if those constraints are altered or mitigated? And, if we agree that no subject is by its very nature liberal or illiberal, how shall we choose and why? But perhaps we will not agree that the spirit of a liberal education is more important than the actual curriculum. Those who think either way are invited to make their case.

Finally, I propose that we consider the role of the teacher in conveying the ends and principles of liberal education as much or more than seeing the student as a consumer struggling to make curricular choices. The tendency today is to stress the latter in order to correct an over-emphasis on the former and to introduce problem-based learning and other techniques for group sharing in the gathering of knowledge. But liberal education in its most compelling forms has depended upon the teacher, not merely as expert but as exemplar in all respects. This is, of course, utopian; but, in discussing liberal education, we invariably invoke ideals. That is one of them, and Douglas Bennett of Earlham College exactly understands the problem when he asks whether liberal education retains a capacity to be “transformative” (Bennett 1997).

What can we realistically expect of the university teacher in today’s professional academic world? Whether teaching in a college or a university, a community college or a research institute,



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virtually all academics in Europe and America are educated and trained within the understanding of a research mission. They are taught to teach their discipline and not something called liberal education or the liberal arts, ethics, or humanism. And they are certainly not required to teach students how to live the good life or a life of public commitment. That would be considered an imposition and an embarrassment and, in the absence of a consensus, likely to result in acrimonious disagreement. The necessity to teach in a liberal arts program, however defined, very often entails a re-learning process, a commitment of time and effort to programs and approaches that are not featured in the graduate schools.

Therefore the question that must be confronted is whether the research mission and liberal education are in any way significantly compatible. Many think otherwise. I have stressed the dependence of at least one conception of liberal education on the research inheritance. In any event, the realities of graduate training require us seriously to consider the effect on liberal arts and sciences teaching. The difference between

Europe, at least the European Continent, and America is that the issue of what and how to teach at university level was decided by the Humboldtian revolution. But no longer. The fact that in America the issue has never been resolved despite the success of the research university in imposing its values on all parts of the educational system, is but one of a number of indications that traditions of liberal education are still regarded as somehow necessary and desirable. To assist us in examining the role of the teacher, I have added an appendix on the new teaching technologies.

These are very large topics. Doubtless they already inform discussion in countless academic locations—in which case, raising them again can cause no harm.

*“The question that must be confronted is whether the research mission and liberal education are in any way significantly compatible.”*



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## *Appendix A: A Note on the New Technologies*<sup>22</sup>

In its best-known historical forms, liberal education has been labor intensive—particularly in its English, Scottish, and American variants, but also in the elite preparatory schools of the Continent. Liberal education remained elite (1-2 percent of the relevant age cohort) until the mid-twentieth century in Europe, and not much in advance of that in the United States. In attempting to conform to the requirements of contemporary democratic society, liberal education has been forced to abandon (defer?) several of its deepest aspirations, especially those that concentrate on the development of a whole person.<sup>23</sup>

The shift away from holism and character formation has been towards an exclusive emphasis on cognitive traits. This is the result of two independent changes that have coalesced over time. The first is sheer numbers. The second is academic professionalism, the professor as expert rather than as paragon. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) or technology enhancements of the large lecture course build upon the shift in scale by substituting capital investment for labor, following industrial practice. I will not question whether benefits may be gained from expertly considered uses of the new technology. The unsettled issue for me is whether in the transformation something salient remains of liberal education.

Although large claims are made for ICT or the use of technology in aid of conventional lecture courses, the record thus far calls for careful assessment of what can, or has been, achieved with respect to undergraduate learning. Part of the difficulty in employing teaching or learning technologies lies with the available software, which is not yet suitable for particular kinds of classes. Part of the difficulty lies with members of the faculty, who are skeptical of the claims made on behalf of ICT, or where campus cultures discourage the use of standardized course materials and prefer classroom autonomy. Materials prepared for one sequence of courses may not be transferable to others. Monitoring, editing, and making adjustments in the use of technology while a course is in progress also present formidable challenges to instructors and investigators.

These problems were encountered at Berkeley in an experiment recently conducted with regard to a large introductory course in chemistry. The course was selected for investigation precisely because it was large—more than 1,000 students—and because it fed into other science courses. Gains were also noticed. Students were unusually enthusiastic and made good use of Web sites and online materials, so much so that they often stayed away from lectures! (But students notoriously miss classes and rely on various kinds of circulated cribs. Time of day, lecture style, late nights, and nights partying always play a part.) The materials were relied upon for

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review, for practice in quiz-taking, as replacements for missed lectures, or for studying section material presented originally by teaching assistants whose first language was not English. The technology aside, the course instructors appear to have been exceptionally committed to the experiment and to have taught and participated in ways that made the two-year study stimulating.

The Berkeley experiment involved technology enhancements, the use of online materials in aid of a course that depended mainly upon the lecture format. In such a situation, it is hard to imagine that technology could utterly fail. Television, videos, audio materials, and conventional visual aids have a long history of use in the classroom, and they are successfully employed in teaching. Open universities and distance learning programs rely almost entirely on electronic transmissions, although the investigations of Sarah Guri-Rosenblit of the Open University in Israel (1999), a student of distant learning, reveal how much drop-in centers are appreciated. Personal assistance and simple human contact are high on the list of student desires. Guri-Rosenblit is convinced that these are indispensable aspects of distance learning, and they are certainly essential to any definition of the living arts. Survey research, she says, shows that students who cannot attend live lectures will always prefer a videotape of one, gestures, idiosyncrasies, and all, to an audio recording. And she adds that well-prepared students make good use of technology enhancements and Internet materials, while less-prepared students founder.

The system of electronic transmission plus tutorial attention has worked remarkably well in the United Kingdom, both in the Open University (OU), which is ranked high as a teaching institution in Britain, and in the new University of the Islands and the Highlands in Scotland, local further education colleges providing the tutorial assistance needed to supplement cyberspace transmission. At the commencement of study, every student in the OU is assigned a tutor/advisor who remains until degree day, and each student begins university work with a foundation course in a general area of study. Students appear willing to pay extra for this service.

In the United States, the for-profit sector is the most active in ICT, while in Europe it is government and the universities. Some research universities in the United States—Stanford, for example—allow the same student to take regular and cyberspace courses in certain programs of study. Several notable attempts by university consortia in the United States to develop online courses and create learning opportunities have failed, however. University extension programs are more successful, since they know their audiences and have a century's experience in outreach teaching using all kinds of technologies as they became available. They can also draw upon the

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reputations of their host campuses. Some universities or firms, especially in Australia and now perhaps in China or India, have ventured well beyond their borders to market courses in distant lands, exporting cheap and efficient software. On the whole, such efforts are aimed at large numbers, at part-time degree students, those in search of skills upgrading, and possibly a few who want edification. The reigning assumption with respect to ICT is that market demand generally means vocational courses with immediate application.

Liberal education, however it is defined, has not played much part in the development of online learning. If we understand liberal education to be the aggregate of courses listed under the heading of the liberal arts and sciences, then even entire online courses, not just course enhancements, can certainly be substituted for normal classroom activity. If, however, we rely upon the history of liberal education as a guide, erratic as it is has been and must be, then we notice that a liberal education involves much more than skills and competencies. How to use computer technologies and the Internet as instruments for teaching the living arts is a challenge that has yet to be met. In fact, the attempt hardly exists, since the difficulties are paramount.

Pressure from governments everywhere for cost-effective higher education is very real. The politicians hope that the burden on taxpayers of public instruction may be eased and that underserved student markets may be reached through new technologies. While the Berkeley experiment indicates that, in carefully controlled circumstances, “some” cost-savings (or “stress relief”) are possible, thus far the investment in equipment and specialized talent does not suggest any revenue fix. Furthermore, students are already resorting to e-mail communication on a large scale, and professors are remarking about the added burdens of so much individual interchange. There are no labor-savings here. Nor is the large audience format the most effective use of ICT in a university or college setting. The optimal size appears to be fifteen to twenty-eight students.

But ICT and technology enhancements are, as yet, a world in the making. They are seeking niches and respectability in an educational ecology consisting of for-profit and non-profit institutions, continuing education, sandwich courses (Britain), established distance learning universities, undergraduate and postgraduate education, professional schools, corporate classrooms, and every variety of public and private college or university. The search for respectability constitutes a laboratory for considering just what the various conceptions of liberal education may achieve in the twenty-first century in a great number of different formats. Libraries, the heart of social science and humanities research and providers of the “great books” which accompanied liberal

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education into the present, are now supplemented by the Internet or bypassed altogether by undergraduates. Thus far, the research carried out by Guri-Rosenblit on virtual learning reinforces the historical arguments that liberal education has a special history and purpose and a special structure, and that ICT is most successful wherever it tries to capture some of the distinguishing traits of the great traditions. It may, however, develop a style and process unique to itself, as cognitive psychologists continue their research into how we learn. My own belief is that the experiments being conducted over the Internet and through virtual and open universities are providing us with further, if as yet inchoate, thoughts about the audiences for liberal education, the culture of those audiences, the values that liberal education ought to promote, and the types of teaching styles that may develop as a consequence of the Third Industrial Revolution. Liberal education itself may not much profit from the exciting technology. We cannot know that as yet. But those who think about the longer history of technology in relation to teaching, going at least as far back as Gutenberg type, will undoubtedly find much to ponder as the result of an extraordinary invention.

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## *Appendix B: Participants in the “International Conversation on the Past, Present, and Future of Liberal Education”*

**Samuel Abraham**, Society for Higher Learning, Bratislava, Slovakia

**Thomas Bender**, New York University

**Douglas Bennett**, Earlham College

**Richard Bennett**, Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation

**Dorothy Downie**, National Council on Education and the Disciplines, Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Foundation

**Daniel Fallon**, Carnegie Corporation of New York

**Diane Foster**, National Council on Education and the Disciplines, Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Foundation

**Edwin Epstein**, University of California-Berkeley

**Edie Grauer**, National Council on Education and the Disciplines, Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Foundation

**James Grossman**, The Newberry Library

**Bruce A. Kimball**, University of Rochester

**Nikolay E. Koposov**, Smolny College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, St. Petersburg State University

**Sven-Eric Liedman**, Gothenburg University, Sweden

**Louis Menand**, City University of New York

**Frank B. Murray**, Teacher Education Accreditation Council, University of Delaware

**Guy Neave**, University of Twente, the Netherlands and International Association of Universities, Paris, France

**Thorsten Nybom**, Örebro University, Sweden

**George Ochoa**, Corey & Ochoa, Dobbs Ferry, New York

**Robert Orrill**, National Council on Education and the Disciplines, Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Foundation

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**Oleksiy Panych**, Humanitarian Institute, Donetsk National University, Ukraine

**Robert Pollack**, Columbia University

**Julie A. Reuben**, Harvard University

**Ola Roman**, National Agency for Higher Education, Sweden

**Sarah Guri-Rosenblit**, Open University of Israel

**Sheldon Rothblatt**, University of California-Berkeley

**Carol Geary Schneider**, Association of American Colleges & Universities

**Lynn Steen**, St. Olaf's College

**Roger Svensson**, Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education, Stockholm

**Hilde de Ridder-Symoens**, Ghent University, Belgium

**James Turner**, University of Notre Dame

**Donald Withrington**, University of Aberdeen, Scotland

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# Notes

1. St. John's College, which has campuses located in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Annapolis, Maryland, adopted a great books curriculum in 1937.
2. Information from Brian McGuire of Roskilde University.
3. See the Phi Beta Kappa *Key Reporter*, 68 (Fall 2002), 1, 4.
4. A collection of the relevant documents was made for a conference held at Karlstad University in Sweden on November 2, 1999. It appears under the heading of *Akademisk frihet – lärosätenas autonomi-samhällsrelevans*.
5. Guy Neave's comments were provided in correspondence with the author.
6. Words that contain the English "school," such as *Hochschule*, *högskola*, *grande école*, are always used for postsecondary institutions.
7. The SAT began in the 1920s as the Scholastic Aptitude Test. When "aptitude" became invidious, suggesting an IQ test, it was replaced by "assessment." Even that disturbs some opponents of high-stakes testing, so it is now simply referred to by its initials, which are supposed to be neutral and are certainly meaningless.
8. This does not, however, apply in countries where military service after leaving school is obligatory.
9. Guy Neave has pointed out that such parietal rules as remained in Britain were ended by the 1967 Drugs Act. Wardens of residence halls no longer held *in loco parentis* authority. The age of majority in Europe is 18. It is so in the United States, and yet some residual parietal rules remain. Neave suggests that American parents seek protection for their investment in the higher education of children.
10. Neave.
11. In discussion.
12. Efforts are currently being made to remove or reduce the amount of remedial instruction offered at the campuses of the California State University and College system.
13. Robert Brentano, a medievalist of genius and a sublime teacher for over fifty years. His sudden death is a wrenching loss.
14. For those with an interest in the political relations of chosen and choosers, Edmund Burke's eighteenth-century address to the electors of Bristol remains enlightening.
15. Today, these functions appear to require an army of trained professionals to guide every action.

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16. Robin (1995) explains in detail how liberal education ideas entered into the re-education of POW's in American hands in the Second World War.
  17. Before about 1850, professors in Germany and Scotland were somewhat dependent upon the fees paid by students attending their lectures. Scottish professors in particular were consequently responsive to market demand, another similarity with America.
  18. This point also is stressed in AAC&U's new publication, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* (2002), 26.
  19. Oleksiy Panych's remarks were provided in correspondence with the author.
  20. See the discussions in *Peer Review* 3:2 (Winter 2000).
  21. Thomas Bender's suggestions were provided in correspondence with the author.
  22. In this section I rely on the work of Sarah Guri-Rosenblit of the Open University of Israel, Martin Trow of the University of California-Berkeley, Gary Matkin of the University of California-Irvine, and Diane Harley and her team at the Center for Studies in Higher Education at Berkeley who provided me with the draft report, "An Analysis of Technology Enhancements in a Large Lecture Course at UC Berkeley: Costs, Cultures, and Complexity" (July 19, 2002). This report for the Mellon Foundation will soon be published.
  23. Bennett (1997) correctly notes how disciplinary development overtook character formation in defining the liberal education experience and the part played in this development by the invention of course modules. I have stated as much, putting the movement towards electives earlier in the American experience. Given the strength of the consumer economy even in the late eighteenth century, modules were, in a sense, waiting to happen. Taking the development one step further, I would also stress that the American graduate school, in place by about 1920, not only represents an additional move towards disciplinary domination but also was an attempt to separate scholars from the remaining constraints of the undergraduate curriculum caused by the defects of American schooling. In Europe, the creation of graduate programs in the 1990s in Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands, which preceded the Bologna Declaration, is an indication of dissatisfaction with changes in the undergraduate curriculum. One point on which perhaps I differ with Bennett is the extent to which disciplinary development in its first stages was genuinely regarded as a better way of achieving holism. Innovation is frequently masked, intentionally or not, as pouring the old wine into new bottles as a way of gaining acceptance. The history of liberal education, as indicated, is simply full of such strategies.



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## About the Author

Sheldon Rothblatt, professor emeritus of history at the University of California, Berkeley, was educated at Berkeley and King's College, Cambridge University, and holds an honorary doctorate from Gothenburg University in Sweden. He has held visiting appointments at New York University, Stanford University, Monash University (Australia), the Institut für Interdisziplinäre Forschung und Fortbildung (Vienna), the Royal Institute of Technology (Stockholm), the University of Oslo (Norway), the Rockefeller Foundation Villa Serbelloni (Italy), and at Nuffield College and St. Cross College, Oxford University.

Rothblatt has been a regular columnist for *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (London), serves on the boards of various professional societies and journals and recently became a foreign member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, the body that awards the Nobel Prizes.

A recipient of many fellowships, including a Guggenheim and the American Council of Learned Societies, he is the author of many studies in university and cultural history, including *Tradition and Change in English Liberal Education: An Essay in History and Culture* (London and Boston, 1976), *The Modern University and its Discontents: The Fate of Newman's Legacies in Britain and America* (Cambridge, 1997), and he contributed to and co-edited *The European and American University since 1800* (Cambridge, 1993). *The Revolution of the Dons: Cambridge and Society in Victorian England*, first published in 1968 by Faber & Faber and Basic Books, with a new edition by Cambridge University Press, 1982, is now available as an e-book. *The Elite University and Democracy*, from a series of lectures given at Magdalen College, Oxford University, is forthcoming.

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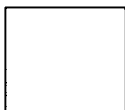


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